

# **Dreams in Real Time**

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## Dreams in Real Time

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## Remains of the Unspoken

Sometimes my dreams seem too real and my reality too distant. The way I see it reality is here and now and in the moment until time turns it to a memory of a moment, which is then thrown into a well of remote memories. One by one, deep into the subconscious they go, into the cavern of the soul where dreams fish their evening's catch. There, they recapture familiar illustrations, abstracted as they are, for my mind's eye | It's like I'm constantly retelling my life. Eventually, it is as if the memories and dreams become one and the same.

Distant memories tell fascinating truths about the now. The tricky thing is, they cannot be truths all at once but only in retrospect of everything past that fugitive intuition. Call it perspective. I'll call it a feeling. I know that feeling now. It tugs at an unfamiliar space behind my abdomen muscles. It pokes at my cerebral cortex. It is at first so vague and bent through the convoluted passages of my mind that it seems siphoned back slowly to significance as meaning grasps experience in its gnarled knuckles. I see it. It is impalpable, but wholly there. First, there is the house.

The Wasserman mansion on Brookdale Heights seemed large enough to house a number of small villages with its basketball and racquetball courts, its Jacuzzi and sauna, its four floors and five bathrooms. When I was a kid, it stood as a looming reminder of what my family was not. I relish it now, not ever having those luxuries showered upon me.

Sean Wasserman was the first baseman on my baseball team and the right tackle on my football team. We were never what I would call friends. We were more or less acquaintances with commonalities, our heavy rolls of fat for instance. We were the fat kids on all our teams. The few times we hung out was for "business V sake: we traded cards, all types of cards, all types of *real* cards. This was before Pokemon or Magic the Gathering or X-Men cards surfaced. We traded cards that catalogued the accolades of real men, star athletes of their respective sports. Occasionally, we rode through Brookdale Heights on his golf cart making targets of signs, trees, and squirrels with his Daisy Winchester pellet gun.

His dad made a parking spot for his golf cart in the garage. It was actually taped off on the ground and a ping pong ball hung from the ceiling to mark the exact spot, identified by a small dot in permanent marker on the windshield, where the ball should touch Plexiglas. Sean reveled in his accuracy as he'd come screeching into the garage and lock the brakes faultlessly. His dad was a pilot so, needless to say, precision was a staple in the Wasserman household. So was distance. Mr. Wasserman was a ghost in that house. In fact, I only recall ever seeing him there twice. Once was at a family dinner. It was the first family dinner, Sean's older brother John included, that they'd had in almost a year.

The moment his dad saw me approaching the table, he turned to Sean's mom and whispered into her ear, I imagine the likes of, 'Honey, there's an elephant at our kitchen table.' To say the least, it was an awkward meal. On top of that, his mom burnt the lasagna.

The other time, his dad was headed out the door in his pilot's uniform. He had a skulking-large personage, tall and thick, but not fat like Sean; he was muscle-thick, like a soldier. I remember him walking into the den where we were playing a video game. He cleared his throat and said, "Hey Seany-boy." Sean ignored him. "Yo, Sean," I looked back at him, but Sean stayed glued to the big-screen. "How you doing kid?" he said at me. Then he snapped, "Sean, pause your fucking game and look at me."

Sean groaned, "Okay." He turned to his father.

"Now come give your dad a goodbye hug." Again, Sean sighed his aggravation. He pressed pause, strained to lift himself from the beanbag chair and dragged his spoiled feet towards his dad who bent down and hugged him. My dad would have broken a paddle over my ass by then. His dad, on the other hand, grasped either side of Sean's lemon-like head with his mammoth hands and shook it back and forth, saying, "Hey, you answer me when I talk to you, okay chap?" as he stood up and quickly straightened his suit.

"Yes sir," Sean responded. He turned to the video game. I was still transfixed on his dad, who's uniform slimmed his bulging aura. Sean hit my arm: back to the fight.

"I'll return in three weeks." He lifted his bags and headed for the door, then tuned back and said, "I'll make sure to pick you up something in Tokyo. Oh, and Sean? Pause

the game, Sean." Sean pressed paused and looked back at him. "Don't let your mom feed you all that junk food, alright. That shit's bad for you. And be good for her. I don't want to hear any crazy stories when I get back."

"Yes sir."

"Hit me a home run next week. That goes for you too, uh," he pointed at me, "what's your name again, boy?"

"Ben," I said.

"That's right, Ben. Hit them long, boys. Don't swing at the sliders."

"Yes, sir," we responded in unison, and he took his leave. Sean mumbled something under his breath as his dad shut the front door. We'd been playing "Street Fighter: Champion's Edition" for over an hour, and I guess I was a natural, because yet again, my Dhalsim beat his E. Honda.

"Man, this shit sucks," he said.

"Only because I'm rocking you," I boasted.

"Whatever." He threw his controller to the floor. "It's just beginner's luck. Besides I don't feel like playing anymore anyhow." He fought gravity to get up, switched off the Sega, snatched the TV remote off the mantle, and languidly approached the leather, wrap-around sofa. Sean resembled his father in build. He wasn't so much tall as he was large. He had broad, thick shoulders, perfectly proportionate to his fat, football-shaped head. His eyes fit his face in pockets, casting a constant shadow over his face, like a junkie in rehab. His family migrated north from Florida's incessant heat and shallow people.

Slipping out of his shoes, he plopped down onto the couch and flipped channels, ignoring my red-faced anger, as I stood directly in his line of sight like a red light.

"Dude, you're such a shitty loser," I said.

"Dude," he said in a mocking tone, "you sound like an idiot when you say *dude*."

"I was on a roll," I said. "I can't believe you turned it off just because I was winning. You would freak out if I did that to you." He shifted on the couch and tried to look past me. I mirrored his movement as he leaned one way and then the other.

"Ben!" he finally said, "get out of the way!" He threw a pillow at me. "It's my game, it's my system, and you're at my house, so get over it and get out of my way."

"You're an asshole," I muttered as I moved to the other side of the couch.

"What!?" he said.

"Nothing."

After a minute of silence, Sean looked over at me and with what was a bit of regret or annoyance, said, "Alright, man, I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm just mad that my dad is leaving for so long."

"It's cool man."

"Hey, you want to know a secret," he whispered as if hidden cameras were spread about the room.

"Yeah," I whispered back.

"Check it out." He turned the TV to channel 37. "See that?"

"What am I looking for?" I asked, squinting at the big-screen.

"That," he pointed, "that right there. That's a pussy, man. And those," he got up and approached the TV, pointing at a blurred smorgasbord of colors and figures with the remote, as if he were giving a presentation on abstract art. "Those, my friend, are genuine, bona-fide titties."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"The nipples, man, look at them." He rubbed himself through his pants. "She is sexy." I was immediately uncomfortable. I felt stupid and perplexed. How could he decipher titties and pussy from what looked like a kaleidoscope?

He sat down at the other end of the wrap-around, eyes fixed on the screen. Whether he was displaying a pretense at manhood or attempting to solidify our friendship by revealing a secret, I was quickly keen to my innocence. In seconds, he had introduced my pre-pubescent world to a collage of blurred boobs, blowjobs, twisted vaginas, and the never-before-heard moans of a woman. I stared at the screen and was aware of what would become a sensual facet of my immediate future: squiggle porn, channel 37. A pair of breasts - pink, then red, then blue - scrolled down the screen. "Oh my god, listen to her," Sean said. Behind the blur, a woman yelped as if she were being whipped. "That guy's screwing her so hard." Embarrassed by the sounds, by the scrolling blips of nakedness, by the newness of it all, I disregarded the TV and watched Sean watch the screen. Sean reached across the couch for the sheet, still staring at the screen. I filched it from his fingertips, teasing for the sake of distraction, and spread it across my lap.

"Wow, what a comfortable blanket. You should really try it out," I said. Sean reached for it again but I scooted down the couch. "Hah," I let out.

"Come on, dude, you're wearing sweatpants," he said, shifting his gaze from the TV. "It's not like you're hot. Toss it over, man." Seeing his seriousness, I obeyed. He proceeded to cover himself. Then he looked at me and at his lap then back at me then at the TV where he settled his gaze and exclaimed his decision with confidence: "I'm going to jack off."

"What?"

"Jerkin the gherkin, you know." He made a hollow fist and shook his hand back and forth. I stared, still stupefied. He rolled his eyes and said, "Masturbating, you dumbass."

I blushed. I was way behind. Not only had I never seen the squiggle porn, I had never even masturbated. Not like he was prepared to do. The most I'd done was rub around until it tickled too much but he was in it for the long haul. He'd had practice.

I nodded knowingly, said "Ohhh, gotcha," and he went to work.

Neither one of us hit a home run the next game because we never had the game. It was rained out, but no matter, Sean's mom still treated it like a victory. She said she'd already ordered pizzas for the after-game party, presupposing that we'd beat the Kiwanas so instead, she invited the team over to their house for a pizza party. My parents passed on the offer, but said I was welcome to go as long as it was OK for me to be without a guardian. Of course, it was fine. Off the field and out of the cover, I dashed for the Wasserman's SUV but my mom called me back to her car to go over the usual conduct rules.

"Benjamin, you behave over there," she told me.

"I will," I said, jerking away, but she had me clenched like a vice grip.

"I'm serious now: be polite, help Mrs. Wasserman whenever she needs it..."

"Mom," I tried again to pull away.

"Wait. Listen. Give me your eyes." I focused in on her. She continued, "Go with the flow and don't ask for anything more than what is given."

"*Mom*, they're waiting on me." I signaled the suburban that was running, lights on, across the parking lot. The rain pelted down on us.

"Remember to *say please* and *thank you*, okay?" she said.

"Fine." My voice, a knife. She shot me a stern look.

"Okay, go on. I love you."

"Loveyoutoo," I said. Quickly, I pecked her cheek and sprinted for the car.

My mom yelled at my back, "Wait for others to be served first and don't go for the biggest slice; it's rude. And..." Her words muffled as I ran, as if each letter of each word latched onto a raindrop and fell with the water, scattering across the pavement. I was more worried about getting out of the rain and into the new-car-smelling, top-of-the-line silver Tahoe suburban. I opened the back door and started in with my head down, and was pushed out onto the soaked parking lot. I heard Sean and Sam laughing.

"Hah hah, Sam, very funny," I said, recovering some part of my pride. I glanced back at my parent's car before shutting the door; they were already inside. My ass was a puddle.

"Looks like you've got a bad case of swamp ass," Sam said.

"Sam, quit picking on him," Sean's mom yelled from the front in my defense, which, of course, embarrassed the shit out of me. Sam was Sean's best friend from grade school. He was heavily freckled, like me, but blond. He seemed just like Sean, except skinnier and poorer. But everyone was poorer than Sean. Their only other difference, as I saw it then, was that Sean gnawed on sunflower seeds and Sam chewed Big Chew bubblegum.

Sean turned up the music from the back seat, Green Day. "What took you so long?" he asked. "I thought you and your mom were going to make out or something." Again, the two cracked up.

"Nah, my mom is just.. .I don't know, weird. She's like so worried I'll mess something up at your house."

"Yeah, my mom's the same way, except without the incestuous making out and all," Sam chuckled. They just couldn't stop. A regular Laurel and Hardy, these two. "But for real," Sam continued, "my mom gets all freaked out about me screwing something up at Sean's, too. You can't really blame her when everything there costs a million bucks."

"Shut up," Sean said as he punched Sam in the arm. "And Ben, sit on this." He handed me an old shirt. "I don't want you getting your swamp-ass all over the car." I sat on the shirt and sank into silence.

I was timid in junior high. Timid and naive. See, being the new kid at Hardin Park Elementary, a K-8 public school right by my house, was a culture shock for me. Grades K-6, I'd attended a private school based out of my church, which was pastored by my

father, so I was more or less destined by default to go to Appalachian Christian School, as were my three older sisters, my older brother and my little brother. It wasn't until my older siblings went to Watauga High School, the only high school in the county, that my parents realized the negative repercussions of raising kids in a school where there's only ten kids, at most, in each grade. They watched my brother go from a sixty person, K-8, private Christian School to a public high school with over 1500 kids; they watched him try and force his way into a niche among clique-jumping schmucks competing for popularity; they watched him decide who and, most importantly, *what* he was past his sheltered existence. It was a tall order, a daunting task, deciding he was a hick, then a prep, then a musician. So my parents had no problem letting Dan and I transfer to Hardin Park for middle school. With only a handful of friends going into seventh grade, including Sean, whom I knew from rec. sports teams, I felt a sense of urgency in forming a camaraderie between myself and anyone who would have me.

By the time we reached Sean's house, the pizza man was already there, waiting and, I'm sure, a bit uneasy. It was early spring, and the rain was on the verge of hail. And nobody knows what'll happen with the weather in Boone or in all of Western North Carolina for that matter. Western North Carolina's stretch of the Appalachian Mountains tends to wedge weather patterns in an unpredictable mish-mesh of temperature ranges. Once, in April, when I was younger, in a single day, a heavy snow fell, and as the day proceeded, the snow turned into sleet, and after about an hour, the sleet melted into a rain/hail mix that tapered off until the sun was out and shining, and just when everyone

was sure that spring had decided to stay, a thunder cloud moved in and dropped hail the size of snowballs, which signaled the sleet and freezing rain and snow all over again.

Later, when I delivered pizzas in college, I learned that anxious waiting game when customers were nowhere to be found. First, I'd check the address, then I'd call (and thankfully, most people had cell phones by the time I delivered), and if I couldn't reach them, I'd call the restaurant and wait longer. There was always a purpose for my patience. Sometimes people were dressing after sex, other times they were out getting a movie, still more times people were too stoned to remember they'd ordered, asleep or downtown by the time I got in touch with them. Only once had I been set up. They tried to rob me; I got away. My future self would empathize with this particular delivery guy, who'd waited, probably, a precious fifteen minutes on us to arrive, missing potential deliveries back at the store, with the knowledge that at any moment a ball of hail could come smashing through his windshield.

Cars lined the street outside the house, a handful of restless teammates and patient parents waiting on their fulsome host, Mrs. Sullivan, to hurry up and let them in. We stopped for gas. I'm sure she planned it that way. The rest of the parents would have to sit outside her massive home and ponder what such a life would entail, and I indulged in that privilege, getting out of the Wasserman's car in the garage and going straight into the house; the rest had to run through the rain.

Sean's mom led the pizza man, followed by everyone else, like ducks in a row, down into the den where she organized on their large mahogany table. We devoured the one-hundred-some-odd-dollars-worth of pizza in moments. The parents quacked their

usual small talk, while we kids attempted feverishly to kill one another in a no holds bar team tag game. The game (and the party) were all-at-once over when Jacob Bowman, gung-ho, ran head down through the sliding glass door that led to the racquetball court. He solemnly, shamefully approached his mother, head low, bleeding from the arms, face, and neck. She screamed as if his intestines were hanging out, and that scream officially signaled an end to the party. Soon enough, the kids and the parents filed out the door, just as they came in. They said their thank yous and goodbyes and Mrs. Bowman showered Mrs. Sullivan with apologies, and then they were gone. Sam, Sean, Sean's mom, and I were all that remained. Mansions are suited for parties. When the party was in full swing, the fung shuai was right, but when it cleared out, the house seemed hollow. Our voices echoed.

Sean's mom climbed the steps to the second story, leaving us alone on the bottom floor. "So what do you guys want to do?" Sean asked as he joined Sam and I on the wrap-around couch in front of a football game.

"Let's play basketball," I suggested.

"We can't with all that broken glass, idiot." Sean was in a haughty mood.

"Talk about idiot," I said, "what was Jacob thinking? I didn't see it. Did he just forget the door was there?"

"Yeah," Sam responded, "he was running down the stairs after me and I swear he must have seen me slide the door open to get into the gym, but he kept running. It doesn't make any sense."

"I heard my mom tell his mom that they'd have to pay for it. The door was like a thousand dollars or something," Sean said snickering, "What a dumbass."

"Did you hear her screaming: *Oh my god, my baby, my baby!*" I mimicked.

"He'll never hear the end of it. And he cried too," said Sam. For a moment we sat silent, then Sam offered an idea: "Let's get in the Jacuzzi."

"Can't," said Sean, "I'm not aloud to use it until my dad gets back. Something with the chemicals."

"Dude, lets play Zelda," I said. Sean groaned his disapproval. I ignored him and said to Sam, "Or how about Street Fighter: Champions Edition."

"I'll play," said Sam.

"We're not playing video games." Sean shot down the idea. I wondered if he was still bitter from the last time I beat him. Then, as if all this was a charade building up to some prior arrangement he and Sam had made, he gave Sam a knowing elbow and said, "Let's play truth or dare."

"Really?" I questioned. "Don't you have to have more people for that?"

"No, we can play with three," Sean answered. Uneasy, I pulled myself off the couch and crossed the room to the window by the back door.

I turned my attention to the television and said, "Nah. I think I'll just watch the football game."

"I'll play," Sam said, as he stood beside Sean. Then he pulled from his bag of names the oldest, easiest, most cliched insult of the lot: "What's wrong, Ben, are you

*chicken!*" Sean adjusted himself, leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest as if to say 'Yep, Sam, that's a terrified chicken if I've ever seen one.'

I laughed awkwardly and said, "Actually, I just learned from Mr. Felker's class that I'm not a bird or a fish. We humans are what he called 'mammals.' Homo sapiens, I believe. Isn't that just wild." Swing and a miss. Sam stared, stupidly; Sean rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Ben," Sam said, "there's no need to worry. It's just a game. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

Sean looked at him, then me, and quickly added, "But a dare's a dare. That's the main rule."

"I'm just saying..." I paced, "What's so fun about truth or dare? It's a stupid idea."

"Come on," Sam said, coaxing me in.

"Whatever." I put my hands out, open palmed, a gesture between withdrawal and acceptance, a compromise. "Fine, I'll play."

"Let's go," Sean said. Picking the remote from the couch, he switched the TV off and slipped around the wrap-around couch where Sam paused to tie his shoe.

"Why do we have to go to a different room?" I asked.

"Because I said so," Sean responded mulishly. We exited the den, crossed the dining room, and steered through another sitting room, down a short hallway, and finally, to a door. Sean opened it slowly, sheepishly, and as he stepped inside, light rushed past us and through us and invaded the room, sending shadows scampering into corners. As Sean

stepped inside, he motioned us to pause and disappeared behind the door. Then we heard in a whisper, "Come on in." As we entered, the door slammed behind us and Sean shot around and let out a frightening scream.

"That was lame," Sam said.

"Yep," I agreed.

Sean mumbled, "Whatever," and quickly hit light switch, revealing a bedroom as bland as a Holiday Inn. The walls were beige, except for a green, white and red wallpaper trim that pictured all different types of ducks. It ran across the center around the room. The bed was large, a small TV sat positioned across from its headpiece on a stand. Adorned about the walls were two paintings: one, a couple holding hands at the edge of a lake, sun setting in full bloom on the other side; the other, a portrait of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the fall, the trees like bursts of flame, cascading colors down and out into the distance. In the right corner a door led to the bathroom. Everything about the room seemed artificial, like cardboard cutouts. It was all so clean and flat and dusted and boring. But Sean wasted no time introducing us to the guest room.

"Alright guys, circle up. We'll play paper, rock, scissors to determine the order." He looked us each in the eyes, and we, in turn, nodded. "We go on *shoot* okay." Three fists meeting three hands three times, then shoot: two papers smother Sam's rock. He was out. Sean and I went head to head: his rock crushed my scissors. He won. The order went Sean truth or dare to me, me truth or dare to Sam, and Sam truth or dare to Sean. Sean and Sam sat on the edge of the bed; I sat in a wooden chair beside the TV.

"It's your turn first, Ben," Sean said as he wound up a Butterfly Yoyo he'd found on the nightstand beside the bed.

"I know that." I paused. "Truth," I said.

"Have you ever stolen anything from my house?" Sean blurted out, quickly standing to make his presence more intimidating. The yo-yo was clenched in his fist.

I rolled my eyes, looked at him and shook my head. *Had he arranged the game for this sole purpose, this question in mind all along?* "No. Of course not," I said, hoping I'd convinced him.

When I gave Sean the thumbs up and saw him slowly slip his pants down, the blanket resting over his tiny prick; when he licked the palm of his hand, spit onto his fingers and slipped them under the cover to fondle the bump under the blanket; when his hand began to move up and down, and he looked at me looking at him as if I were acting out of place; when he asked, "Aren't you going to whack off too," and I responded, "I don't have a blanket," and he told me I didn't need one, I went upstairs in search of an out. A strange feeling of shame tiptoed through my conscience. I felt resent stomping behind it, daring me to get back at him for perverting our friendship. What could I do though? I couldn't tell on him. I didn't want to fight him. His mom gave me some juice and asked if I was having fun. I told her I was and that Sean asked me to get something from his room. Once inside, I began to rummage through his things, feeling that if he could steal my trust, I could steal his stuff. I pocketed a Gerber flip knife, a handful of football cards, and a store bought, glow-in-the-dark, rubber band bound ball. In moments

I was downstairs again. Sean sat in the middle of the couch, one leg propped up on the center table as if he'd been watching the game all along, as if it never happened.

Surprised at his position, I gave him a quizzical look. He returned a cold, mitigating stare and asked me to get him a coke from the mini-cooler. Was that the trade-off, I wondered?

"Check it out, man, Florida State is kicking ass." He pointed at the TV. I was awed at his ability to shrug it off. I felt justified with my booty, as if I'd earned it by proxy of his compromise. It never happened.

"You've got to tell the truth, Ben," Sean demanded. "That's the point of the game, dumbass."

"I did tell the truth," I shrugged.

"Sure," he responded.

"I did, asshole." I stood up, challenging.

"Ok, fine. It's your turn to ask Sam," Sean, the director, ordered.

"Truth or dare, Sam," I offered.

"Dare."

"I dare you to kick Sean in the balls," I challenged. Sam stood up, shrugged and wound his leg back.

Sean interrupted, "No way is he kicking me in the balls."

"A dare's a dare. That's the deal, remember, Sean," Sam said with a stupid smirk. "It's not like it'll hurt your itty-bittys anyways."

"Whatever," Sean scoffed, "Mine are bigger than yours any day of the week."

"Bullshit," Sam retorted.

"Then let's see 'em," Sean said.

"Screw you, fag." Sam stepped up to Sean as if he were ready to brawl, and then he shifted his eyes to me. "Ben, my *shriveled* balls are bigger than Sean's marbles. I guarantee you that."

"Dare him to show us his balls then," Sean said, eyes fixed on Sam.

"Excuse me?" I responded.

"Dare Sam to show us his balls, Ben. He said dare, and there's a perfect dare."

"I don't want to see his balls, Sean." I said frankly.

"Just do it, Ben." Sean was almost yelling now.

"Fine," I yelled back, "Sam I dare you to show *Sean* your balls." Without a second glance, Sam unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, dropped them along with his boxers, lifted his shirt, gripped his balls and walked towards Sean.

"See that Sean? That's what I like to call the 'rat brain'," Sam said, referring to the image he made with his grasped balls. I looked at it too. I was immediately humiliated, not so much that I'd seen his balls, but that he had hair down there.

"I still think mine are bigger," Sean said enthusiastically and, without a dare, he copied Sam: unbuttoned, unzipped, undid, dropping his clothes to the floor - his thighs like thick jellowy lumps of ham hock. He pulled his shirt up and grasped his marbles, rat brain style. They faced each other, balls in hands.

"I can't even see yours over that fat gut," Sam said as he slapped Sean in the belly. Sean pushed Sam back.

"Alright Ben," he said, "you be the judge." He turned to face me, as did Sam, both still gripping their balls. "Whose are bigger?" Sean asked. He and Sam both leaned back and pushed their pel vises forward. I tried not to look at them but I did. Sean had hair too. I was way behind these guys, both with hair, both bigger down there, and in the formative years of middle school, any fault was fatal, every vulnerability exploited by all, known by all. I couldn't show them mine.

"Sam's are bigger," I said, and I walked past Sam and Sean and grabbed the door handle but Sean pulled me back by my shirt and slung me around his body onto the floor. In unison, he and Sam retrieved their pants and undies from around their ankles. "You can't leave yet."

"Come on, man. This is weird." I sat on the edge of my seat.

"It's your turn. You can't leave on your turn." Sean pointed at me and his eyes pushed me back into the rocking chair. Defeated, I sighed and decided:

"Truth, I guess."

"You can't do truth two times in a row. Everybody knows that," Sean scoffed, a half-laugh, half-cough.

"He's right, Ben," Sam said. I'd like to think he felt my discomfort. I'd also like to know why, then, he didn't help me get out.

"Fine, Sean. Dare," I conceded.

"I dare you to show us your dick." Sean blurted, like he'd been waiting for the opportunity since scribble porn, channel 37.

I nodded my head and said: "That's it, I quit."

"You can't quit mid-dare, Ben," Sean proclaimed.

"How many fucking rules do you have?!" I shouted. I stomped to the window. The rain melted down the glass in sheets. I looked back at them.

Sean tilted his head to one side as if he were speaking to a child and said, "Come on, Ben, show us that little weeny." They both laughed. "There's no way out of a dare." I turned from the window and faced them. "That's it," Sean coaxed. They each went down to one knee in front of me and literally began to pull my shorts off before I could shirk away. They smiled at one another. I wondered if they already knew what they would see. I closed my eyes and threw down my pants and whitey tighties in a swift, thorough motion.

"Oh my god," Sean howled, "you don't have a single pubic hair. It's baby-smooth down here. Have you even hit puberty?" My face flushed, my heart in my gut, my breath short and swift.

"Obviously he hasn't," Sam answered. "Just look how small his penis is." One of the two flicked it, heightening hysterics. I jumped back and quickly retrieved my clothes from around my ankles. Sam stood, timidly approached me, and patted me on the back. I dodged his touch but he inched forward and said, "Don't be embarrassed, dude. You'll hit it soon." The pity hurt. "It's going to be fine," he reassured. I faked a cough into my hand, more like a nervous twitch with a touch of sound, and nodded my head.

"I don't mean to interrupt this tender moment," Sean said, "but Ben, it's your turn to ask Sam."

"I know it is, Sean." I hated him. I turned to Sam, who'd backed off, and delivered the line.

"Truth," he answered.

"Ok.. .Let me think.. .Have you ever hooked up with a chick and what's the furthest you've gone with one?"

"First off, that's two questions. Next, well, you should ask your mom the rest," he laughed and carried on: "I have a confession to make," he stood, squared his shoulders and said in a deep scratchy voice, "Ben, I am your father." He was imitating, of course, Darth Vader from Star Wars.

"Seriously, though," I pushed on.

"Why do you want to know?" He laughed.

"I'm just making sure your not gay," I responded.

"Of course I have," he said. I motioned with my hand for him to continue.

"Second base. I've gotten to second base." I knew for fact that neither one of them had ever touched a living, breathing girl. Sam was too stuck up Sean's ass, who was too vulgar and way too fat, to get a girl.

"Sam," I said, a bit more confident and cocky, "I'm not talking about our baseball games."

"Shut up," he snapped. "Second base with a chick, dumbass. That means I've felt her up." I nodded, as if I knew that already. Sean's breath behind me scratched steadily.

"Alright, Sean," Sam said, crooning his head around me. "What'll it be: truth or dare?"

"Dare," Sean said.

"Ok." Sam paced the space between Sean and I, " I got it. I dare you to suck Ben's dick!" Sean looked like he was actually pondering it. My eyes begged: *just end the fucking game.* Sean returned a smile and let out a raspy laugh.

"Ok. I'll do it, but I don't know if it's possible," he said. They both cackled. I shook my head. I might have said no. I might have screamed for his mom. I might have run through them both in a frantic escape, bolted out the front door and stood in the floodwaters. I might have washed off the filth.

I backed up. My eyes shot towards Sam on the bed and then at Sean as he went down knee-by-knee and nudged towards me. I put my hands over my belt buckle. Sean winked at me like a sleazy old man. Sam scooted against the headrest of the bed, unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down to his ankles, revealing his small erection. Across the room, I looked straight into Sam's eyes. He saw me for a moment and seemed to gauge the fear in my eyes before his gaze shifted to Sean, who'd unbuttoned my pants and shrugged my whitey-tighties down to my knees. In shock, I tried to jerk away but Sean threw me into the corner and pinned me there with his weight. He winked at me again, grabbed the end of my penis between his thumb and index fingers, barely touching it, as if it were diseased, and rocked his head back and forth in front of my crotch. But he wasn't sucking me off; his mouth was nowhere near my penis. Sam churned away on bed, harder and faster, and he muttered something like 'Oh, yeah,' and I turned my head to the wall. The wallpaper displayed a variety of ducks. I counted them across the stretch of the wall. They were all recognizable but I only knew the name of one: the Wood Duck, with its collage of patterns and startling stature, so astute and clean. The slapping got

louder. So I counted the number of ducks between each wood duck: five. So there were six different types of ducks represented on the wallpaper before it repeated itself. And the only thing I knew about the other ducks were that I recognized one of them distinctly. But what was its name? My mom used to point it out at Wildcat Lake. "Look Benjamin, there's the \_\_\_\_\_ duck. See how it can dive for its food." But I couldn't remember. Sean and Sam sat on the bed, Sam giggling into his hand. My pants were still down. I pulled them up, and Sean cleared his throat. He leaned forward.

"Truth or dare?" he asked. Thinking back, I wish I could go there and shake the little kid that I was and tell him to stand up for himself, to run out of the room and quit the stupid game, but I was resigned to their leadership by that point. I took a deep breath, knowing that whatever I said wouldn't really matter. A pendulum had swung forward; it was destined to swing back. I accepted 'dare.' Sean smiled. He knew I'd given up. "I dare you to suck off Sam," he said, and as if applying a period to the sentence, he pulled down his pants.

Sam stood and yet again dropped his drawers to his ankles. He scooted towards me, his erection pointing out. I almost cried. I rode on a psychological roller coaster, an emotional hike that brought me to a certain, indisputable peak, where I had the choice to leap over and let go and tumble down in tears or to turn around and descend like a *real* man into the cold reality of emotional death. I looked at the ducks lining the wall and entered the graveyard. I dropped to my knees. Sam shook his dick, shoved it into my forehead and laughed. Sean lay on the bed jacking off. The same scenario as before, except I was the sucker.

Sam's crotch smelled like curdled milk and mushroom juice, like old sweat. I felt it in my stomach, as if I'd tasted it. I breathed and squeezed my eyes shut and told myself I could fake it like Sean had. I looked up at Sam and winked. He winked back - good - we weren't for real. His penis stood erect in front of me and I began to bob my head back and forth in front of it. I felt so ashamed. I closed my eyes and heard Sean making that pestering slap, slap, slap sound behind me. I could hear his breath between slaps. It was heavy and scratched like the sound of emphysema. Sam pretended it felt good, though I hadn't actually touched him. He moaned, "That's it. Yeah, just like that." I opened my eyes for a second to find that Sam yanked his penis back and forth just inches away from my face. I lost my breath in a moment, as if it were siphoned out of me, and felt lightheaded. I looked for the ducks on the wallpaper. They seemed frantic, in frenzy. My eyes shot to the window; it was still a blur of rain against the glass, so closed my eyes tight and searched. I found a tiny white room in the corner of my mind. It had padded pillow walls, each with its own window, each view an incandescent portrait of the sun reflecting off water, different waters - a stream in my neighborhood in one, my mom's coy pond in the other, Wildcat Lake, and the Atlantic ocean, down the narrow barrier islands of Cape Hatteras along the Outer Banks, right near the pier, the light ever-shifting off the waves. I could see myself from a third-person point of view - birdseye - shifting window to window. Each window became brighter when I looked out; brighter at the pond and brighter at the lake and brightest at the ocean, the lighthouse shining through the glass, and I was bathed in the light, and then a pop, like a bomb exploding, everything was dark.

Something tugged at my head. It was Sam. He stood above me and pulled me up by my hair. I stood up and pushed back. He seemed angry but why? Sean too. Sean scowled and looked at me as if he were disappointed, whether at himself or at me, I didn't know. The room seemed brighter than before, probably because my eyes were shut, but something about the lighting seemed different. The energy had been zapped out of the room. The game was obviously over. Sam walked towards the window and stood quietly. I knew he saw nothing beyond the water, beyond his humiliation.

I asked Sean if I could use the bathroom. He pointed towards the bathroom door directly behind me, but he knew I was only wanting out. I think he felt the claustrophobic choke. He unlocked and opened the door, and I rushed out into the sitting room, through the den and into the master bathroom where I turned on the sink and washed my face in cold running water. I looked up at myself, there in the mirror, eyes scarlet-red - as red as my hair - unable to tell the difference between my tears and tap water, between myself and my reflection. And knowing I had to pull myself back up and bury my feelings and be a man, I swallowed the moment. I digested the time. I forgot the immediate. I made a compromise with myself. It never happened.

I unveil my eyes in pint-sized phases. I crack them open and shut; open just a bit more and shut, open more than before and shut, and finally open so wide - lion eyes -that the shock of reality wipes the images clear. Nothing but fleeting visuals.

My lover is clenched in my grasp, my mouth at the nape of her neck, her body molded perfectly with mine. Slowly, I slip out of bed, put on a shirt and lift the blinds.

The morning sun pierces through the glass and illuminates the room, the dim shadows making way for the new day. She opens her eyes, and I bend down to kiss her cheek.

"Good morning."

## Mammas

A chilly breeze dragged through the sky just enough to hear a low-pitched howl over the airport traffic. It was the dead of winter in Kenya, a cool fifty degrees. The tawny kites outside my room soared up and dove down in turns. On this morning the male caught a rabbit and as he pulled it up into the tree, the female went after it. She jumped down to his branch. He hopped to another. She followed close enough to snatch the rabbit's head with her beak.

As I watched their coy game of passive-aggressive flirtation from the stoop in front of my door, Esther, the manager of the guesthouse, brought me a coffee, a fresh mango and a copy of *The Standard*. Tucked beneath a handful of articles about gun-toting gangsters in Nairobi International Airport, and a handful on the impending parliament elections, I found an article, page A15, about some lions that caused a ruckus in the outskirts of Kenya. It was suspected that some Somali soldiers snuck over the northeastern border and stole three cubs from a pride for, the journalist assumed, a zoo in Baidoa. Eight people were killed

See, when the mammas found their cubs missing, they retaliated. Not against the soldiers - no - the soldiers were long gone by the time the mammas knew. They attacked the next closest town. According to local accounts, at 5:15 am, at daybreak, six female lions raided the small village of Duha. They trounced into every single home in search of their young. Swift and methodical, they attacked and killed six people; two of the injured died the next day. A sheep dog and three goats were also killed in the raid.

I took a mutatu into town. It was a route fifteen, and a Saturday, which meant it would be overcrowded to say the least. Public transportation. Nissan buses. Sat fourteen legally. Held twenty. Lots of sweat, stench and squish involved. Only the wealthy and the whites have cars.

The mutatu was a dark maroon color and had painted on the side panel a picture of Biggie Smalls aka Notorious B.I.G., on the other side Tupac aka Machiavelle, and on the backside, Jay-Z aka HOV. The rear window brandished the tag: "3 WYZMEN." (With a Y and a Z) It roared through traffic blasting the reggae greats - Steel Pulse, Dennis Brown, Don Carlos - to the volume of vibration, enough to rattle the glass. The loose window beside my head slapped back and forth against the frame, its lock broken.

Riding in a mutatu is like riding a Ferris wheel that is constantly stopping to let people on, except the difference is, you never get to the top of the wheel in full swing and you don't necessarily go up; instead you go up and down and back and forth and in and out and this way and that in some of sort of ostensibly organized chaos that is supposed to make sense. In time, you tune yourself to that every day pandemonium, the near misses

and light bumps. I've heard it compared to the running of the bulls.

At Times Towers, I squeezed my way out of the van, crossed the overpass and headed for Kenya Polytechnic University, a few blocks down, near Railways. Omondi -or Dennis, his Christian name - was waiting for me at the gate. He and I helped arrange a multi-university HIV/AIDS conference on my first trip to Kenya, the summer before.

We caught up, took some tea and ate mandazis. He picked France to win the World Cup. I bet on the home team, Germany. Finishing his chai, Dennis said, "Let's go. Come on." He checked his watch, stretched his jaw and smacked his cheeks, flat-palmed, while he yawned.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he said with a smile that boasted his perfectly white teeth. He strutted strong up the sidewalk.

"Dennis, give me something. A clue. Something."

"It's my backyard."

We kicked it up the block toward Railways. Caught the 33. The last name on the schedule board was "Kibera."

Getting off the mutata, the drunken conductor yelled at me, "Mzungu! Mzungu! Mimi ni pesas sa nini!" Basically, *Hey, White dude, white privileged person, give me your money!* I answered, "Hapana, Hapana," meaning *no way, no way*, which brought a rise out of the rest of the passengers. They cheered and jeered.

The second I got off the bus a thousand heads turned. Being redheaded, loud, large and white, I did not go unnoticed.

Naturally, in the Kenyan slums, whites are a rare breed. Like an endangered species. Like manatees or killer whales. The second I stepped off that bus, I became a rich, fat, cherished, endangered species. Here and there I saw a couple of whites - missionaries no doubt - with Bibles in hand, saving the poor heathen souls, and to their credit, providing hope. Religion is a cruel ambassador of hope in Kibera.

In an attempt to loosen myself, I casually mentioned the article.

"Damn the Somali," said Dennis. "Would you believe, as a matter of fact, the same thing happened two years ago? Yes, the same scenario, except the mamma's raided two towns that time and killed thirteen people. Is very sad."

"How did the Kenyan government respond?"

"We didn't! What are we going to say: give us our lions back or we'll attack? Hm? They're just lions, nothing to start a war over." We entered the heart of the market right outside the DC district, along the railroad tracks. Of course, my whiteness drew all sorts of attention, but it was the singularity of my whiteness that allowed me to slip into the scene. Unless you live in Kenya, white people don't travel alone through the slums. They come in packs or herds, some of them dumb enough to carry digital cameras that cost more than an entire district's yearly earnings. Most of them are church groups and they will do some good by donating money - as long as it's to the right folk. But that is all changing. I recently heard about "Pity Tours," a new form of urban sightseeing for well-heeled Westerners. The impetus for "Pity Tours" is that many wealthy tourists have grown tired of African safaris, so a few safari companies turned inward, deciding to exploit another animal species, entirely more vulnerable: the squalid poor.

From a distance Kibera looks like the ruins of some ancient city. There is barely a blade of grass on the land and the pot-holed dirt roads become oceans of mud after a downpour. Streams of waste. Roaming, shit-eating chickens cluck around every corner. The smell of stale piss tinges the air, acrid and horrible. Half-trailer-sized houses, more like sheds, are everywhere, built from dry wood and corrugated tin. Row after row after row. They seem endless, teeming with tired mothers and malnourished children. Most of the roofs are spangled with small plastic bags - flying toilets they call them. Shit into a bag, throw it on the roof, wait for it to dry and use it for compost. These are not vile people. These are desperate people, neglected people.

Of Nairobi's 2.5 million, almost one million live jam-packed in Kibera's 25 square miles. Most of them flocked rural to urban in search of jobs, wives, whatever. Kibera is free land - wasn't meant to be but it is. People, especially the Nubians from Sudan, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, started squatting on the land during the revolt wars when the colonial governments were just settling in. The Nubians fought for the Brits. They used the Kenyan land as a safe haven from their own people who wanted them dead.

It used to be a pine forest, but slowly, as the economy grew in the expanse of British colonialism, more and more people flooded the area. When the Brits pulled out, the country had too much on their hands to manage and no time to keep workers from entering the urban life. So Kibera kept growing and with the influx of people, President Kenyatta, at the very least, had the workforce needed to bolster the economy. He did. With all the money pouring in, they tried to relocate the slum. Didn't work. President

Moi tried to move it a number of times. Never worked. Kibaki has tried twice since being in office. Won't work.

If there was such a thing as a bright shadow, I was it. I walked side by side with Dennis, like a local. As I got deeper in, people stopped staring as much. I kept my chin up and my smile strong, made frequent eye contact and walked as best I could to emulate Dennis. The smell of mboga and nyoma choma seeped out from the small kiosks. As we pushed our way through the afternoon market, a butcher passed me carrying half a skinned calf over his back. We stopped for some cow's hoof soup and to say hallo to some of Dennis' buddies from the youth group he started in Kibera's DC district. Dennis is a community leader. Good guy, a responsible twenty-one year old *man*. He's dark, skinny, has a high forehead, handsome, confident and smoother than Frank Sinatra. He walks with an ease and determination that commands attention, smiling and gesturing hallos wherever he goes. People call him *the Ambassador*,

So after leaving the youth office, I finally asked him where we were going. "Laini Saba."

"For what?"

"To see the mammas.," he replied.

"What mammas?"

"My mammas."

Turns out, he had also started a women's support group in Kibera. Forty to sixty women, most of them HIV+, all widows, all mothers, gathered every Saturday to make

jewelry for selling at the market.

"What should I do when I meet them?"

"Just be yourself. They'll love you."

There's a humbling pressure in this situation. Almost like interviewing for a job. You want to be on your game. You want not to screw up, do anything stupid, but no matter, you always do, always will do something culturally daft. I tried to compose myself as we entered a little neighborhood of tin huts. Dennis knew everyone there, and he knew his way through the labyrinth of shacks and clothing lines until finally we stopped at a door covered by a white sheet with purple pleated flowers. He gave me one last look of confidence and said with a nod, "You'll do fine." He knocked. Someone called us inside.

Dennis pushed through the door and I immediately heard "Jambo Den-O!" from a number of voices. As I entered, a hush settled over the room. There were eight women standing in front of a row of chairs along the left wall, a table scattered with beads in front of them. A big woman with a tender face was at the other end of the table. The house - or room rather - was blanketed off so that the bed and kitchen supplies were hidden. It was the big mamma's house, hers to own, left to her by her husband who'd died of AIDS the previous year. She housed six orphan kids who made their beds of thin mats and clothing. She was the appointed leader of the women's group.

"So," Dennis started, "this is my American friend Benja. He wanted to visit with you all, say hallo, and get to know you." He spoke in Kiswahili. That he had to speak in Swahili says something of the inherent disparities of extreme poverty: when the British

colonized the area, they institutionalized English as the national school. English first, Kiswahili second, then the tribal tongue were, none of the women had attended school.

After some formalities were taken care of, Dennis a mute, all stuck in my head. I searched for words, tried to mouth, closed my mouth. They all started laughing. Thank to laugh. Without it, I'd be helpless. With it, the mood loosered about, shook all of their hands, and introduced myself. I told be invited to the meeting. Dennis sensed my insecurity and

"If someone would like to tell Benja about the mammja translate." One of the women introduced the crew, told me of the group, that each woman held an office, the big woman taught the rest how to make the beads from a certain mixture paint, all the processes needed to survive in the informal mar literally means, *hot sun*. She also helped finance the group w: made, the whole idea being that they work communally to mike and feed their children. It was expressed with such ease and group..

At the end of their presentation, they made a plea for yes, yes, ndio, ndio, ndio, but I couldn't. The positive prejudi hand exchange between Africans and Westerners. No prejudi is all good. Both sides romanticize the exotic.

language, taught in every  
Disenfranchised as they  
cued  
say to speak. I sat silent as  
Godething, opened my for  
giving us the ability a bit, and  
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's organization, I will they  
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:noney. I wanted to say yes,  
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e, no matter how positive,  
ica as if every

They think of America

American is rich. We think of Africa and think of elephants  
*i* gatherer tribes. In both cases, the prejudice may be positive  
 b ask for help because we go as humanitarians. We tell  
 them w extent, but often times they ask for more than we  
 can give, their money around like it's fools-gold, so why  
 not ask? But people are embarrassed by their poverty, and  
 we indulge in It was my turn to speak. They kept saying, as  
 Kenya feel at home." Dennis told me to tell them about my  
 family a backpack. I stayed quiet. He stacked a few boxes  
 of condoms saw the mammas looking baffled at him, so I  
 took the moment guy. A regular stud, huh?" Dennis  
 laughed and quickly trans laughed. There's such power in  
 laughter bringing people tog< contact. The same for touch.

It was that easy. A simple communal laugh and my in  
 serendipitous flood of abandon ran through me, drowning  
 about my family, my upbringing, my heritage. Told jokes,  
 stories. We talked about America, about HIV and AIDS in  
 America as opposed to Ke so accessible in the US and so forth.

In no time, three hours had passed. Dennis began to  
 s women, the head mamma, was telling us a story about the  
 biifth it seemed, no one in the room had heard. The child, a  
 boy, wfts who died during her pregnancy. That's when she  
 knew she h

nd zebras and hunter-  
 ut it is misinformed. They  
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 Tey see white people throw  
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hibitions were gone; a *r*  
 insecurities. I told them  
 lya. Why antiretro viral s are  
 lift in his seat. One of the  
 of her first child - a story,  
 named after his father, id  
 contracted the virus, and

that her child was more or less doomed. She named him Elisha. He was born with AIDS and died within eight months. She said the Lord just wanted him back. She took a breath and looked me square in the eyes and I realized she was making a symbolic gesture. She said, in what broken English she knew, "If is sawa sawa na nini, I ask you to be my son."

What!?! All the time my heart had been galloping like a flogged horse and in a moment it stopped all together, and being so humbled and embarrassed and choked and guilty and shocked and overjoyed, I took off my hat, put it on my heart and said, "Ndio, Ndio." She laughed at me and stood up, opening her arms. I hugged her, and her large arms engulfed me, and she pecked at my forehead and squeezed me and said something in Kiswahili that made all of the women laugh and clap. Dennis told me later she had said, "I never thought I'd have a white son and now I have an American son."

Then she held me out from her - I was a puppet in her hands - and said in English, "Now you tell your mamma you have a kubwa mamma." Kubwa means fat. She continued, "Tell your mamma, I love her." I agreed to it all, of course, and turned to Dennis, who was smiling ear to ear. We said our goodbyes and left.

"Wow, Dennis," I said, as we made our way out of the maze. "I didn't expect that. I don't know what to say."

"Good," he said. "You talk too much anyways." We walked along a dirt road, out of the little neighborhood and into another, hopping shit-water rivulets and planning our next move.

I thought of the lions, mothers with a cause, daring to track down by whatever means their stolen ones. I can only imagine the faces of the people when they woke to a

bounding, 400-pound lion knocking down their door. In a second so fast and terrifying, a lifetime could flash before their eyes, and a million emotions could run through them like a swarm of bees.

But what if the cubs were just shot or poisoned or buiied alive, giving the mothers no reason to raid, no reason to kill, no hope of recovery? Would they still search? Would they still go looking even with that definitive knowledge, aimlessly seeking, consciously or unconsciously, heart screaming in a desperate ache for their children? I'd like to think they would. My mamma found me.

### Glimpses of Life

I lay on an inflexible mat wedged between two stiff couches, filling the empty space in Nyi's tiny living room. Staring at the ceiling, I stretch my arms and feet and let out a deep yawn. Behind the wall at my feet, Nyi sleeps alone in her bed. We plan to board a bus headed for Nairobi tomorrow. It is my last night in Nakuru before returning to the US, and I will miss the place immensely. This city is addictive.

Some bizarre beauty slips onto its streets, wisps with its winds, and boils in its Chai. A beauty indiscreet and nameless throbs in thin crevices between its political instability, rampant prostitution, rapid development, and class disparities. And I can only catch it in glimpses, in the smiles of street vendors, along the pathways through the graveyard, around the corners of back-ally shops, atop the roof restaurants, in the town children, in the orphan babies, and in Nyi. In an odd way, it reminds me of home.

Maybe it is the mountains - milimanis, they're called - that flank the eastern edge of the town, remnants of the great plateau that leads down and down, more than 8,000 feet, into Nakuru's niche of the Great Rift Valley. They are nothing like the Blue

Ridge Mountains, but mountain-folk are all alike. We thrive on the solace of surveying what lies beneath, the land that expands from our eyes to the horizon. We toast to the climb; we toast to the hike, the work it takes to reach that remote place of indulgence. We relish the familiar sweat that gathers in beads around our chests and armpits and the air we're privileged to breathe. And to breathe... maybe it's the air that takes me home.

When Morris led me to the top of Mount Menengai, he pointed ahead as we neared the peak, to a point where the dirt road seemed to disappear into the sky, and told me that as a child, he thought it was the exact spot where heaven met earth. And it could have been, as high as we were. From bottom to top to bottom, we hiked over twenty miles that day and not a single globule of sweat dropped from his back. I was astonished, and drenched. But after all, he'd been hiking the same mountain in this African climate since he was a child.

Morris has history with Mount Menengai. It was his playground, his schoolyard and now his workplace. He said the boys in his primary school used to comb across the hills, as they were responsible for providing the lunch meat for the rest of the students. Armed with small spears and rocks and the knowledge bred from everyday practice, they hunted hares, as abundant on Mount Menengai as the maize crop. He boasted that in one day, they would catch and kill as many as twelve for the school. If they caught none, which was rare, the garden vegetables the girls gathered would have to suffice. Now, he observed, the rabbits were sparsely seen, many of them driven from their habitat by mountainside developments - businesses, hotels, high-scale houses.

One such business was his workplace, the Graceland Hotel — an ambitious establishment that featured a large, outdoor swimming pool, a snooker room, a bar, Kenyan cable TV and a complimentary breakfast. At twenty-one years old - only a year older than me - he worked as the floor manager, custodian, and laundry man for the hotel. This is where I met Morris, over a year before, on my first trip to Kenya. At that time, some American students and I helped clean and cultivate a large, mansion-sized property that was donated to an orphanage we worked with called New Life Homes. Though I'm sure my red hair and fair skin jarred him, he had remembered me (and my name) from a single night the summer before. We had played snooker together. When he saw me this year, he couldn't believe his eyes. His jaw fell; he let out a yelp, dropped his mop, ran across the courtyard and embraced me. In fact, he even led me around the back of the main building to the kitchen entrance, where he summoned one of his buddies and proudly proclaimed, "See, this is my American friend, Benja. I told you the truth."

Morris and I sat at one of the tables in the courtyard, his boyish voice pitched above the fence and down the mountain as he rehashed the past year. His mother had died, and his father remarried. He was helping support his two nieces and nephew until his aunt's malaria - and the bills that came with it - cleared. As he talked, my eyes began their inevitable descent into darkness. Traveling zapped my energy. Morris noticed and quickly digressed to questions: "So what about you?" he asked. "How has the past year treated you?" Still groggy, I sat up in my chair and stretched my jaw.

"Me?" He nodded. I responded, "Me, myself, I have stayed busy with college." He perked up.

"You are at a university?"

"Yes. Actually, the university paid for me to be here."

"No," he gasped.

"Yes," I answered. "You know, New Life Homes?" I pointed over his shoulder at the gate up the street. He glanced back.

"The baby home, yes?"

"That's it. I'm visiting a few of the homes in Kenya - first in Nairobi, the here, and next in Kisumu. I'm just researching them and how they function, then writing about my experiences." It must have been the upteenth time I'd explained my trip's purpose. Morris began to laugh. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said, waving away the question.

I persisted: "No, you're laughing at something," I said. "What is it? Is it funny that they paid for me to come here?" His eyes roamed past me and caught something. Ignoring my question, he waved at someone and I heard a woman's voice say, "Jambo, Morris. Sawa sawa?"

"Excuse me one moment," he said. Morris crossed the courtyard around the pool and down to the edge of the fence where he spoke to the woman on the road. At one point, he pointed back at me and said my name. The woman waved at me and proceeded up the road to New Life's gate. "Sorry," Morris said, as he approached our table. "Now, what were you saying?"

Smiling, I shook my finger at Morris, then pointed towards the gate and asked the obvious question, "What was that all about? I heard my name. You pointed at me."

"That, Benja, is Josephine. She manages the baby home at night when the rest of the nurses have gone home. Very kind woman. I know her from town."

"But what were you saying about me?" I asked.

"Oh, I told her you were my friend," he patted my hand, "and about your studies with the baby homes. She wants you to come see her one night." Morris's smile, much like his demeanor, strangely resembled that of the old, odd Mona Lisa ~ demure yet knowing.

"Thanks," I said.

"Now what were we saying before the interruption?" he asked, then remembered, "Oh, that's right, the college money." He giggled into his fist.

I woke early the next morning, cold and sore, lying on top of the covers, my feet dangling off the bed, having fallen asleep while unpacking my things. At the sight of the still-tied mosquito net above my head, I jumped off the bed and shot to the bathroom, where the mirror reflected pockmarks, residual mounds of the mosquito feast on my face. I swiftly enacted my revenge - *one, two* - scrolling the walls for those God-forsaken, disease-ridden, filthy scum of the earth. *Four, Jive*. My bare palm was an engine of justice. *Seven, eight, ten*. Their blood, my blood, covered my hands.

Jumping and chasing the brainless suckers took all of thirty minutes and had me sweating by the last splat, so I showered and split for a quick breakfast. It was the best I'd had in Kenya: fried eggs, sausage, fresh fruit, cereal and toast with white coffee and sour passionfruit juice. I scarfed it down in minutes, and was off. Wishing Morris a good day,

I headed up the back trail, across the road, and to the towering, steel front gate of New Life Homes. I banged and shouted "jambo." Feet crushed against gravel on the other side, and the guard approached the door, lifted the peephole, saw me smiling and demanded in deep, pronounced Kenyan accent, "Who are you?"

"My name is Benjamin. I'm..."

"You are Benja?" he interrupted. I nodded. His eyes smiled. The lock turned, the door opened, and at the other end stood a very tall, dark and thick Kenyan man accompanied by a tiny, scrawny fellow leaning on a garden hoe. They both smiled at me and held out their hands. "Jambo," the big man said. I shook his hand, then the next.

"Jambo," I returned.

"My name is Peter and this," he motioned to his miniature friend, "is Moses. Welcome. Feel at home."

"Asanti-sana." I bowed slightly, and lifting my head, I saw Geoffrey approaching me up the gravel driveway. Geoffrey and his wife, Elizabeth, were appointed to run the Nakuru home. He had helped me and the other students clean the property the year before. In that time of sweat and dust, we grew close.

"Excuse me," I said and parted the men to embrace Geoffrey. We hugged; he grasped my head.

"Sawa sawa?" he asked.

"Ah, Poa. Nimechoka lakini hapa," I said. He laughed.

"Ninakosa wewe. Miaka inaonekana kama," he said, testing my Kiswahili.

I smiled and responded, "Uh, ok, I caught 'you' and 'it has'."

He laughed again. "You are getting it. Slowly, but you are getting it. What I said was, 'I missed you, and it seems like years since I've seen you.'" He paused and turned to the home. "Come. Come see what was once so dirty and empty; now, there are babies." He squeezed my head, and led me inside.

The home used to be an office building. A wealthy Kenyan telecom businessman donated the property to New Life Homes, along with four others in different provinces. In its new design, there are four bedrooms, three full bathrooms, two living rooms, one office, one sunroom/playroom, a kitchen, and a diaper room. It sits on an acre of land, with a guesthouse, a sufficient vegetable garden, a patio, a clothes-washing area, and yard space surrounded by a huge, metal, electrified and barbed wired wall.

Inside, the house was alive. Nurses bustled this way and that - four hired, one volunteer - and the babies' cries rose from the sunroom, like the proverbial calls of whining chicklets waiting for food. Nine babies altogether: Kate, Lance, Abraham (Abu), Sharon, Mary, Ethan, Moses, Phillip and Daniel - five toddlers and four infants. It was feeding time. One of the nurses, before ever introducing herself, handed me an apron, two bottles, and two bowls of porridge and said, "The two toddlers on the end, Kate and Lance." She pointed and disappeared into the kitchen. Geoffrey laughed.

"I guess it's time for you to work." He patted my back and added, "Me too. I'll be in the office if you need anything." Before I had a chance to speak, he was gone. I approached the large sunroom where three Kenyan women in aprons simultaneously glanced up at me, smiled, offered hallos, and went right back to work, feeding the babies.

I sat in front of two toddlers, both of them crying in their feeding seats, both of them adorable. Kate and Lance, I was told. Kate's chubby Kikuyu cheeks jiggled as she rocked in her seat. Lance's Luo features stood out: a long face and large lips, from which trailed a steady hanging drool. I geared up and gave it a shot. One spoonful for Kate, one spoonful for Lance. They eyed me lazily as the food trailed down their chins and onto their bibs. Neither one swallowed.

"You have to force the spoon in and hold it there," the slender nurse said, scooting down the bench towards me. "See," she took the spoon from me, scooped the food off Kate's bib and plunged it into the baby's mouth. Kate's jaw rotated and the food was gone.

"Thanks," I said, a little embarrassed at my inability. "I haven't fed a baby in a while."

"It's ok. I'm Yvonne." She shook my hand. "This is Abigail and Margaret, our volunteer." Abigail was older, probably in her forties, and Margaret was twenty-one (as she later told me) and a welcomed distraction. Gorgeous. Yvonne continued, "Mary, in the kitchen, is our resident doctor and Solami, the one who put you to task, is our head nurse. Welcome."

"Thank you. Hallo," I said, waving down the line.

We put the babies down for their afternoon naps and started cleaning. I volunteered with the laundry crew. Yvonne, Margaret and I stood outside and scrubbed out stains, soaped up clothes and hung them out to dry. Margaret and I played a coy game of now-you-see-me, now-you-don't as we hung the bibs, rags, and onesies. Or, at least,

I'd like to think it was flirtation. As we pinned the last line, Elizabeth and Geoffrey pulled their car around the front of the building. Elizabeth hopped out of the front seat. "Hallo, Benja," she yelled at me, waving both hands. "Good news ladies, we got the baby." The women behind me gasped. "She is in the hospital, downtown. We're off to see her now." Then to me, "Benja, I will catch with you tomorrow." With that, she returned to the car. Geoffrey leaned over her lap and said, "You look tired, Benja. Go home and rest. I'll see you tomorrow." I gave a thumb up and took his advice.

Back at the hotel, I lounged in a hammock, a Whitecap Lager at my side and thought about this new baby girl. I could see her body; tiny as it was, palm-sized even, like the newbies I'd seen in Nairobi. She was likely the most vulnerable in the hospital, probably HIV+ at birth.

I imagined her life outside the womb, as with so many like her, involving a single instance of human contact, that being the instant of her birth: squeezing tiny shoulders through her mother's stretched vagina - slime, blood, and shit everywhere - a cut of the cord, a cloth, a doctor's rubber hands and into a padded open box. That's it.

I envisioned her in a hospital room packed with others - cries, whimpers, and non-verbal sounds reverberating wall to wall. They almost certainly lay naked, just like the baby orphans in Nairobi, and their hunger in those first crucial hours likened that of a puffer fish expanding its sharp needles along the insides of stomachs.

In time, after days, maybe weeks of this day-to-day boredom, their senses develop, becoming keen to nothingness, to a sterilized stench, to a pulsating beat, to a

foul flavor, and to the blank white ceiling. And time, for most of these abandoned infants, is nothing more than an uneventful blip between life and death.

First, I knocked lightly, then again, then "jambo?" Then I banged a steady pound on the gate, layered with repeated calls, but to no avail. No one was coming. I stood silent and listened. A faint scratchy breath caught my ear. It repeated. Peter was asleep at his post by the door. That was the only explanation. So I took up a handful of gravel, climbed the side of the gate and poked my head up over the top, my eyes level with the electrically charged barbed wire. As carefully as I possibly could, I tossed pebble by pebble at his slumped over form until, groggy, he shook his head awake and saw me smiling above him. "Wake up, sleepy and let me in," I said. He shot up and unlocked the door.

"Good evening Benja!" he forced a shout.

"It is only ten and you are already sleeping, huh?" I teased.

"No, I was not asleep."

"Yes you were. I say you there," I pointed, "sleeping." I made a snoring sound.

"I was just resting before the late night." He rubbed his eyes. "Josephine said you would be coming earlier. I've been waiting for you." He smiled. "I mean to tell you that my cousin is very sick and needs to go to the doctor, but he doesn't have any money. I told him that I knew *one* American that may be able to help, and that is you." He was square to my face.

"I can't Peter. I've told you before, I'm not like other Americans. Very poor." On his standards it was a lie, but I had a strict budget. I knew what my skin represented: \$\$\$.

But after the flight, the bus fees and the partial visa fee, my money entering the country was approximately seven hundred dollars to last over two months. I could have been staying in the compound's guesthouse, Geoffrey and Elizabeth's home, for free, but for reasons beyond me, it was impossible. Probably the new baby. Maybe the last American visitor left them in a bad place. Most likely, they hadn't offered because they were too busy.

"Is ok, Benja."

"Sorry, man," I lamented.

He pointed at my mouth. "You have gum?" Indeed I did. I gave him a stick of Big Red and crossed the gravel driveway down to the entrance of the home. Morris's friend, Josephine answered, baby Ethan in one arm and three bottles in the pocket of her apron. I'd caught her off guard. She smiled and brushed her hair from her eyes.

"Come in. You must be Benja."

"Yes," I smiled, "and you must be Josephine."

"Call me Nyi. That's what all my friends call me." Nyi had beautiful mocha skin, perfect teeth, and widespread smile to boast them. She led me into the kitchen and scooped up a tray of bottles. "You are here just in time." Handing me the tray to carry, she opened the cabinet where a number of pill bottles were organized along a shelf.

"Feeding these babies one by one is tedious," she said, facing the cabinet, "but this late, we only need to feed a few." She took four pills and motioned for me to follow her. In

the living room, between the toddlers' bedroom and the infants' room she stopped and placed the pills on a tray and asked if I knew the babies by name. I nodded. She smiled, "Good. Will you please grab Stephan and Abu?" I followed her orders, bringing the babies out one at a time. Abu was plenty awake when I picked him out of his crib. He needed a diaper change. One by one we fed the kids, she administered their pills and we attempted, in vain, to put them back in their cribs without waking the others. Soon enough, after we had coaxed them back to sleep, the place was ours to own until six in the morning.

"What do you normally do when all the kids are asleep?" I asked, hands deep in dish-soap and hot water.

"Oh, I don't know. Here." She handed me a towel. "I busy myself, like with the dishes," she motioned at me, "or sometimes I'll read a book or clean or make cotton-balls."

"You make cotton-balls?" I asked.

"They haven't shown you?" She tilted her head at me.

"No. What are they for?"

"Wait." Nyi exited the kitchen then turned back at me, "Finish the dishes and wipe off the counters, then meet me in the living room." She was glad to have the help, which made me feel needed. I heard her open the closet door next to the kitchen, pull something out and cross the kitchen into the living room. Drying off the last of the dishes, I hung the towel and met her in the next room. "Come," she said, leading me by

my arm down into the sunroom. She sat me down on the couch in the corner and dropped a thick paper-towel-looking roll onto my lap. "It is a cotton roll."

For the next hour, we sat on the couch and talked while picking chunks off of the roll, meshing them down and rounding them out for butt-wipers. Every once in a while one of the babies would cry out and we'd attend. She asked me why I wasn't staying in the guesthouse.

"Geoffrey and Elizabeth said they couldn't provide for me right now." I tried to speak without showing my bitterness. "I told them I'd buy groceries and take care of myself but they said it would be too much."

"You're serious?" She was genuinely shocked.

"Yes."

"Let me tell you something as long as you promise to keep your mouth shut." Nyi locked me with her eyes.

I already felt like she was a long time friend. "Promise."

"Eliza," she said, "is crazy." She gyrated her neck for emphasis.

"What do you mean?"

She looked around the room as if we were being spied upon. "I tell you, Benja, she is a terrorist. I will leave it at that."

"Whoa. She can't be that bad." I shook my head. "Of course she's going to be stressed with running the home, but she can't be that bad."

"No, you are wrong. Can you believe she plays favorites with us women? One day she told Mary that I had complained about her the night before when it was she who

asked me if Mary was doing anything wrong. What is that? Hmn? And then, she comes back the next night and tells me that Mary has been talking bad about me. It gets me so angry."

"So she gossips?" No big deal, I thought.

"YES!" Nyi shrieked. A vein in her neck bulged. "All the time, Margaret said this and Solami said that. Gossip, gossip, gossip."

"I guess women are the same everywhere," I said.

"Shut up." She laughed and threw the roll of cotton at me. I snagged a handful of cotton balls and dropped them over her head. She poised her finger in front of her face as a warning and grabbed the roll up off the floor. As she sat back down, she continued, "I am sorry for complaining. It is just, I can't believe she would not let you stay here."

"It could have been Geoffrey's decision."

She mocked a laugh and said, "No. She has him by the balls. He does not make the decisions around here."

I winced. "Well I don't know. It doesn't make any difference to me." What Nyi said about Elizabeth hadn't bothered me so much, but when she took issue with Geoffrey an uncomfortable chill ran up my spine. Hesitant, I continued, "What sucks is that my money situation is," I searched for the most appropriate words, "not good. You see, I'm a student and most of my grant money had run dry."

She rolled her eyes. "Ha"

"What?"

She glanced at me as if to hold back but I leaned in, enticing her to continue. I'm one for honesty. So was Nyi. "I laugh because you're American. You *say* you're poor but I very much doubt that."

"But I'm not like the rest," I pleaded.

"Yes you are, Benja. That's what they all say." She was honest.

"No, seriously. My school paid for the trip and all I have left is this." I yanked my wallet out of my back pocket and shuffled through it. I pulled out an ATM receipt and showed it to her, pointing to the balance bar; it read: 10,000 Ksh, which was the equivalent of about \$ 180.

She scoffed. "Tell you what, Benja, let's trade bank accounts. With this sort of money.. .Whew, I could buy my son some very nice clothes." I was complaining to a woman about money, who, in all likelihood, would never have my opportunities, who would never be financially secure. "How much does the hotel cost per night?" she asked.

"Eleven hundred bob." "Bob" is short for bamba, which means 'cash' in Kiswahili.

"Oh my! You must be kidding." I shook my head. She continued, "And how much longer will you be in Kenya?"

"I'm scheduled for two more weeks."

Nyi tisked behind her teeth and shrugged her shoulders, as if she'd convinced herself of something. She looked at me resolutely and said, "It is settled then, you must stay with me, Benja."

"What?" Left field. Out of the park.

"You heard me," she challenged.

"I can't do that."

"Why not? Besides, all my friends will think I have an American boyfriend. It will be so funny." She smiled. I was still stifled. I shifted on the couch and knocked the cotton roll to the ground. She bent to pick it up and as she rose I caught a glimpse of her cleavage. Kenyan women are sexy, plain and simple. Nyi possessed a stunning elegance that permeated the air wherever she was. And making neither wholly a sexual decision nor wholly a monetary decision, I took her offer.

It must have been three in the morning before I scuttled down the road and back to my bedroom. I was to be packed and ready by seven. In the morning, we walked down the mountain, the road lined with kiosks that ran into town, around the graveyard, across the bridge and, finally, down to the day market, where we bought some tomatoes, some ugali flour, and caught a mutatu, a form of public transportation, to her side of town, the Safari district.

The district was spangled with a number of small, gated compounds surrounded by concrete-filled rock walls. Hers was the furthest back before the fence to the Nakuru national game-park, which centered on the largest ankle-deep lake I'd ever seen. It was home to millions of bright pink flamingoes that would fly in every morning from Lake Baborasa, which was fifty kilometers away, up in the highlands. We got to her place as the last of the migrants were soaring in: flying in a mass, a pink v-shaped cumulous cloud, deep and wide.

As I stepped through the gate, the guard yelled, "Mzungu! Mzungu!" announcing that a white man had arrived. Children rushed around the flat in front of us and swarmed me, hands extended and high fives coming at me from all directions. The flats all looked the same from the outside: three apartments to a flat the size of a double long trailer. Nyi led me to hers, offered me an apologetic smile and said, "I'm sorry, Benja. It is small and dirtied. I did not expect company." I waved her off. Entering the living room, I was reminded of my next-door neighbor's shed when I was a kid, both in size and make-up. We had converted it into a cramped house of sorts with couches and posters and whatnot.

Nyi turned on the lamp next to the couch by the door. A small coffee table sat between the two couches, matching end tables on either side of the couches. She led me into the kitchen. "This is where the magic happens." I laughed, and she said seriously, "You will see, I am a master chef." There was no refrigerator, or dishwasher or stove, no expensive Westerners appliances adorning the kitchen to make life less demanding. She quickly grazed over the bathroom and apologized for the lack of a shower or tub. I told her to hush up.

That evening, after familiarizing myself with the area and meeting some of her neighbors, Nyi sat me down to a homemade Kenyan dinner: ugali, mboga, and nyuma choma. Simple and filling. Ugali is Kenya's most popular food, made from mixing corn flour with boiled water. Nyi served it as an upside-down bowl shape on a plate surrounded by the nyuma choma, which is beef stew, with a side plate of the mboga, which is cooked cabbage. She did not lie about her culinary expertise; it was delectable.

We talked up to half past six, when she had to go back to work. She told me not to fret though, because she had the next three nights off. Before she left, we went next door to recover a mattress her neighbor's had set out for me. We cleared out a space and she was gone. I slept soundly.

The next morning, Sunday, I went to church for the first time in what seemed like ages. Nyi warned me beforehand because I had told her some of my qualms with church life. "I hope you know what I am getting you into, Benja," she said from the front seat of Barbara's car. "It is a Pentecostal church."

Barbara, her long-time friend, a woman of dry wit and honesty, smiled into the rearview mirror. "Believe me, Benja, they will love to see you there."

"Me or my skin?" I retorted.

"Your checkbook," she replied with a laugh.

We entered the worship a bit late. The preacher was a fired-up African American woman, self-appointed, "the Teacher," who had married a Kenyan man she called "the Apostle," and they had conveniently adopted an orphan they called "the Prophet." She said a quick word after the first round of worship and invited the "The Prophet" to the pulpit. He stood in front of the congregation, a gold chain dangling from his neck, and said that he felt the Lord's presence in the room, in particular, the spirit of giving resting upon the room. And he went into a lively sermon on the importance of tithing.

As he was winding down, he invited the worship leader forward and had the ushers hand out tithing envelopes. With inspirational music at his back, he asked the

congregation, "Who has ten shillings they can give me?" A man from the front row gave him a coin. "The Prophet" continued, "The Bible says that whoever gives to the Lord will be repaid ten-fold." He took a one hundred shilling bill out of his pocket and handed it to the man. Five rows from the front, he looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Whatsoever is precious to you, you should give to the Lord. And give again. And give again. Take what you have and *give* to the Almighty! Hallelujah!" Then the worship leader began singing a motivational song. The whole charade seemed scripted. They - "the Teacher" with her diamond earrings, "the Prophet" with his gold chain and cufflinks - reminded me of tel evangelists. At the end of the service, I found "the Prophet," handed him my tithing envelope in person, and thanked him for the service. I didn't give a dime.

Afterwards, back at Nyi's house, we ate lunch with Barbara and her two young daughters, one eight and the other five. We sat in the Nyi's living room discussing the church service when my rental cell phone rang. It was Geoffrey. He wanted me to see the new baby. Eager and excited, I asked Nyi if she wouldn't mind me leaving. No problem.

Geoffrey met me at the gate, his eyes red and wide. "Benja, how are you?"

"I'm fine." I patted him on the back. "The question is: how are you? You look tired."

"I am. Come." He grabbed my hand, as Kenyan men often do to show their unity, and held it as we walked to the door. "We got her just before dawn," he said.

"But you and Elizabeth went to pick her up two days ago."

"I know," he opened the front door, "but there was a dilemma with her health. If we had moved her, she may have died." I didn't need to know more.

By habit, I walked straight towards the sunroom where Yvonne, Mary, and Margaret sat with the toddlers. Geoffrey tugged at my shirt from behind. "No, not in there," he said, "back here." He turned me around and led me through the kitchen, past the diaper room and through a large, empty foyer, what would eventually become the infants' rec room when there were more babies in the house. He opened one last door and peeked inside, then motioned at me to follow. His feet became animated, each step like that on ice. Shoulders slunk, head down, he crept along the short hallway to a room in the back. As we entered, Elizabeth shushed us, mouthed 'Hi, Benja,' and pointed to the baby.

Geoffrey whispered into my ear, "Her name is Annette," and cleared a space for me to stand over her. Annette, no bigger than a mango, lay still in the incubator. Just three weeks old, her mother dead, her father nowhere to be found, her malnourished body a testament to helplessness, I could not help but dwell on her eyes. They looked dead. A cold sheen rested over them; they did not move. It was as if they were made of glass. With all the activity around her - the incubator, the air pump, the iv, the nurses - she looked like a glorified doll, lifeless but priceless.

I stood over her and wondered if somewhere in the pit of her being - whether instinctual or a deduction of the soul - she was aware of being unwanted. For Annette there were no eager parents standing beyond the looking glass making goo goo faces at their newborn daughter. There was no semblance of "family" at her birth. Until just

before dawn on that day, when Geoffrey and Elizabeth brought her home, Annette's only interaction with humanity involved rejection.

When I returned to Nyi's house over an hour later, a tall, dark man in army garb sat erect on Nyi's couch. Hearing Nyi in the kitchen, I poked my head around the corner. "Hey," I said to her. She glanced up at me blank-faced, and I motioned my eyes towards the man in the living room. She just nodded and sunk her knife into the sukuma leaf. So I took a breath, turned and sat down with the stranger in the living room.

"I am Cofi," he said, hand extended.

"I'm Ben. Nice to meet you," I returned. "Hi, Barbara." She sat to his right, arms crossed. She nodded at me and was silent. "So you are a soldier, I presume?" I waded through the uneasy mood.

"Yes." He smiled, almost menacingly. "Does that frighten you?"

Taken back, I let out a nervous laugh and said through my teeth, "No, why would I be frightened?" Barbara stood up and walked into the kitchen. He smiled again, this time genuinely. He could tell I was nervous. Leaning forward, eyebrows low, he juked at me, as if he were going to strike.

"I am only joking you," he exclaimed. "Welcome, welcome, feel at home."

"Well for the time being, " I said, "at least while I'm in Nakuru this is my home." I laughed. He leaned back in his chair and eyed me, so strangely intimidating. "So, how do you know Nyi?" I asked attempting to change the subject.

"She hasn't told you?" he replied, in a defensively.

"No."

"I'm her husband," he said. He looked towards the kitchen, side-eyed, as if her were about to pounce in there and tear the place to shreds. Catching the cue that something was off kilter, I lied. I slapped my head, a 'duh' gesture, and said, "Oh, so you're who she keeps talking about. I am so stupid. I guess I didn't hear her say that you two were married."

"Yes," he said, "she's my wife of eight years." He adjusted himself and leaned forward, eyes pinned to mine, no way amused. He continued, "So did she mention her son? We have a child living in Nairobi with her sister. Did she tell you about Scott?"

"Of course," I replied in honesty. He excused himself and went into the kitchen. Barbara came into the living room and pulled me out the front door.

"He is an asshole," she said abruptly.

"Yeah," I agreed, "what's up with all of that?"

"Nothing. I'm sure Nyi will tell you later."

"Why didn't she tell me she had a husband?" I questioned.

Barbara sighed. "It is complicated," she said. Cofi left a few minutes after, and to my surprise, Nyi didn't say a word. Apparently, she didn't want to talk about him.

Barbara, Nyi, and I went to town for a couple of drinks at a place inappropriately deemed The Palm Tree. Sunday nights were never busy. All the while, Nyi kept checking her cell phone. Every other minute there was a call. She just ignored them. The other man, Solomon, a friend of Barbara's, bought one round, and I bought the other. We watched a hilarious TV prank show, while we downed our beer. Glass broke outside

and caught my ear. A drunk staggered by the front of bar. For whatever reason, I stared him down as he passed. Head bobbing, he looked towards us, saw me glaring at him and walked through the open door. Though we sat on the other side of the bar, he leaned forward, as if I were directly in front of him and slurred, "Mzungu."

"Check it out," I said. Their heads turned in unison.

"Oh my god," Nyi said, hiding her face.

"Shit," Barbara added.

"What's wrong," I looked at them then back at the man who'd come closer, maybe twenty feet away, leaning against a table. Nyi yelled something at the bartender, probably asking him to remove the lush.

The man pointed at me and yelled, "Mzungu," followed by drunken Kiswahili. He looked at Nyi, who had her face turned away from him, and screamed something indecipherable. He grumbled under his breath stumbled closer, dragging a chair at his side but was intercepted by the bartender and forcibly thrown out. Pulling himself to his feet, he looked back at me once more then disappeared down the dark ally beside the bar.

"What just happened?" I was stunned. "Nyi, what was that all about?" Nyi looked me in the eyes but stayed silent.

Barbara answered, "That was Cofi's cousin. He said Cofi would not be pleased to see Nyi with a white man."

Nyi shook her head in anger. "I'm sorry, Benja," she said, "for putting you in the middle of this. Cofi was sure to find out."

That night, after Barbara dropped us off at Nyi's, Cofi came back; probably to make sure I wasn't sleeping with her. She had already said goodnight to me and was in her room. He entered the house as I lay on the mattress in the living room journaling. I said hallo, and he smiled without a word, and moved on to Nyi's room.

For the next hour, I heard snatches of shouted Kiswahili, every so often interspersed with "shits," "damns," and "fuck yous," from Nyi's strong and resonant voice. From the very intonation of her voice, I could tell she was strong-willed. It sounded like she held her ground. A large crash came from the room. She'd thrown something, clay or glass, at him. I quickly stood up and went for their door. I paused. It was none of my business. It could have been an accident for all I knew. I touched the handle. It was none of my business. A hush settled over the room. What if he were choking her. I grasped the handle and almost twisted but halted at the return of their voices. This time I turned around and walked towards the front door. Right then Cofi came out of the room. I pretended to ignore his presence behind me because I was scared. I half-expected him to pounce on me and beat me senseless, but he didn't. I lit my cigarette, and he tapped me on the shoulder.

"May I have one," he asked.

"Of course." I pulled one out; he put it to his lips and made a motion for a light. As I went to light it, he snatched my lighter and did it himself, then handed it back.

"Next time you come, you should bring your friends," he said. "By that time, we will have a large home, enough to keep all of you. You will see. Everything will be fine then." His bullshit was translucent. We finished our cigarettes and went inside. He

returned to the bedroom. Where before it sounded like a battle zone, now there was only a dull whisper between the two. A minute later, he was in the living room standing above me. He looked down at me on the mat, nodded and pulled down his pants and took off his shirt proclaiming, as if with pride, "Now, we sleep." He laid on the mattress next to me. Uncomfortable, I searched for one last thing to say. I told him to hit me if I snored.

When I woke the next morning, he was already gone, as was Nyi. She left me a note on the counter next to a papaya and some sweet homemade chapattis. It said she'd gone to town pick up some groceries and take her mother to the doctor. So I went to meet Morris.

In the White House district on the southern end of town, near his house, Morris introduced me to his aunt, uncle, two nieces and nephew. We drank heavy Chai. Then there was the hike: almost twenty miles up Mount Menangai and down the other side. It took all of six hours and as we walked back into town, a gathering of schoolchildren followed behind. Most of them were on their way home. First, it was only a couple of boys. I played games with them as they followed behind. They called their friends from across the street, and somehow they multiplied until, at one point, there were over twenty-five schoolchildren, in uniforms, following Morris and I down the side of the road. I felt like the Pied Piper, except I wasn't leading the kids to their death. They mimicked the way I walked, the brave few daring to touch me and make faces.

By the time we returned to Graceland, nightfall was near. I had arranged by phone to meet Nyi at the hotel and like clockwork, as we arrived from one end, she came

in from the other. I said goodbye to Morris and we were off. On our way back to town, at dusk, we crossed a side road leading down to Rangala Drive, the main milimani road. We had a perfect view of the city, encompassing the old downtown area and the sprawling business sector adjacent to it. The city lights, all yellow and neon, glimmered, as they booted up and the sun rapidly descended over Lake Nakuru. And suddenly, row by row, they shut off. We looked at one another, perplexed. "The power must be out," Nyi observed. "We need to hurry to town." Continuing down the hill, we passed through the graveyard to save time. At one point Nyi stopped dramatically at a pair of tombstones and mumbled a quick prayer under her breath. I eyed her. "My brothers," she explained. I knelt to read their tombstones. "One died of AIDS, the other in a car accident." She paused. "Ok, let's go."

We rushed through black market clothing lots and local craft stores to catch the last of the night market vendors in town, those beleaguered salesmen, who must have undersold all day. They waited for people just like us to snatch up something, anything for a few more shillings; they all charged lucrative, ridiculous prices, mostly due to my whiteness. Nyi lied to one of the vendors that I had been robbed, which meant she had to pay. Begrudgingly, he agreed to lower the price, and we returned in a Tuk-Tuk to Nyi's place, where, before even entering her home, we hastily approached her neighbor, two buildings down, a kiosk vendor, for candles.

"So," Nyi said, when we were back in her house. She lit the kerosene grill; "I need to tell you about Cofi."

"Yeah, I'd say so," I said. "You know, I did sleep with the man last night." I pulled out a pack of cards and shuffled them slowly. I'd taught her how to play Gin Rummy my first night at New Life Homes. I dealt under candlelight while she talked.

"He is my husband, but he is not." She laughed bitterly. "You see, when we first got married, everything was fine. I loved him. He loved me. I was actually pregnant with Scott before the wedding, so we had to rush it. Two years ago, he got a job with the Army, a solid job. He used his connections with the rugby team to get in."

"What rugby team?" I asked.

"Oh, I did not tell you? He is the captain of our national rugby team."

"Well, that explains why he is so huge," I responded. She took a deep breath through her nostrils and pulled the candle closer to the cards, her hand shadowing half her face.

"One night I came home early from New Life and I walked around the corner, right here," she pointed to the bedroom, "and Cofi was in the bed with a naked girl who was only 19 years old. He was almost forty then." She stopped a moment and put a finger on her eye. She continued. "It hurt so much, I tell you. So much. I ran to the bed, and he was yelling at me to leave, and I pulled sheets off of them so I could see it with my eyes, and the girl was screaming at me, calling me names so I grabbed her by her hair and pulled her out of the bed and hit her." A tear slipped slowly down her cheek. "Well he got out of the bed and pushed me off of the whore so she could run away. He pressed me against the wall so hard my feet were off the ground and I was choking. He raised his hand to hit me, but something held him back. I pushed him hard and told him to get out

with his slut. It is the same thing my father did to my mother. I told Cofi to hit me if he dared, and that I would kill him if he did. So he left. I'm telling you Benja, it hurt so much."

I paused. I had no practical comparison to offer, no common thread. All I could muster was, "I'm so sorry, Nyi."

Her lip trembled; her knee shook. She said, "This is plight of the African wife." She sniffed. "This is what happens. This is why we have no firm structure in Africa. This is why AIDS is everywhere. We have weak families. We have no cornerstone." She rocked her head side to side as if she were working up to something she thought she ought not say. "The worse part is, last month, a nurse friend of mine told me that Cofi came into her clinic. She said he tested positive." She put her hand over her mouth like she had never vocalized it until that moment, like she could push the words back in. Her hands moved to her eyes, about to cry, but yet again, she pulled back, choking the urge. "Now he wants me back. He says that I am his wife and that we must be together. I don't know what to do."

Neither did I. What could I do? Say I was sorry, again? Say that I understood? I had nothing for her and she knew it. All I could think to do was sit up on my knees and scoot to where she sat. I wrapped my arms around her, and she tucked her head into my shoulder and sobbed. The candle burned beneath us, nearly to the end of its wick before we said goodnight.

I woke the next morning, fully aware that it would be my last day in Nakuru. Nyi was already awake, hanging laundry behind her building. Upon seeing me at the door, she said, "So you're *not* dead. You're just lazy."

"What time is it anyways?" I asked, pulling my shirt over my back.

"It is already nine!" She exclaimed.

"Nine? You call that lazy?"

"Yes! How do you expect to get things done so late in the day? Hmn?" I shrugged. "Well, I've made you chapattis, and there is passionfruit juice on the counter."

"Thanks, Nyi."

"Finish them quick. We must be off to town." After breakfast, I took a rag bath and met Nyi outside the compound. One of her friends from town called her as we walked towards the road to catch a mutatu, and said he was on her side of town and that he'd pick us up in his Tuk-ruk. We waited by the train tracks, and, down the road and around the corner came the motorbike, hauling ass down the dirt road, the trail of dust behind it spit into the air like a chasing sandstorm. Tuk-tuks are three-wheeled motorbikes with covers and a passenger's seat positioned over the back two wheels. He swerved over the tracks and up to us. "Get in," he said. Nyi and I decided to split ways for the day, as I wanted one last day at New Life, and to say goodbye to Morris, and she needed to see her mother's doctor and visit with Barbara in town.

I hopped out of the Tuk-tuk in front of the gate and pulled out my money. First I thanked him, then asked the cost "Asanti-sana kwa rakibu. Ni pesa ngopi?"

He laughed, "Zii bei," and waved me off.

"Nini?" I asked, confused.

He responded in English, "Keep your money. A friend of Nyi's is a friend of mind." With that, he revved his engine and pulled a U-ie back down the mountain. Small blessings are precious.

I turned to the gate, but before I could knock, the door swung open and Peter stood on the other side smiling. "Benja," his deep voice bellowed, "I heard you speak the Kiswahili. You like the language, yes?"

"Yes, of course." I nodded. "I need to know, at least kidogo," I displayed a small measurement between my fingers, "to get around."

"Yes," he laughed, "is very nice."

"Thank you." I sloped past him towards the home. As I passed, he tapped me on the shoulder. "Yes?" I turned and asked.

He pointed to his mouth. "You have candy?"

"Not today," I answered, "Sorry."

I made my way down the gravel drive to the home. Yvonne and Abigail busied themselves in the laundry area to the right of the home, a handful of onesies dripping on the line. Inside, I was greeted by the familiar smell of sweet potato porridge, Margaret and Salomi in the sunroom ahead of me, a line of miniature rocking chairs in front of them, shoveling food into the toddlers' mouths. The sun beamed into the house from all directions, the laughs and cries of the babies creating a melodic quality of charm.

Baby Ethan crawled along the floor, the explorer that he was, and up to my foot where he playfully tugged at my shoelaces. I picked him up and carried him into the

kitchen, where Mary stood, warming up the formula milk for the children. As she hummed to herself, her petite body handling a large crock-pot half her size, I snuck up behind her and lifted Ethan above her head. He snagged a piece of her hair and yanked.

"Ah!" she screamed, hopping around to find me laughing. Angry, she smile.

"That was not funny, Benja! You scared me half to death."

"I didn't do anything. It was Ethan." I tickled his stomach, and he giggled. She was not as amused as I.

"Last time someone scared me - it was my brother - I fainted. Imagine, had I fainted, you would not feel good."

"But you didn't," I said as-a-matter-of-factly. She punched my arm. "Oh my God," I pretended, "so painful. You know, this is my last day, and now, all I have to remember you by is a broken arm." I held it and winced.

"Shut up," she laughed. I moseyed back through the living room, flying Ethan around, making airplane sounds, and landed him on the blanket in the sunroom. Mary followed behind with a tray of warm milk bottles. She placed them on the counter and returned to the kitchen.

Salomi pointed to the tray. "Can you grab those for me, and hand them out to the infants on this side," she motioned towards half of the kids. "Their names are written on top of the bottles."

"I know," I said and walked around the row of seats to face the babies. The moment they saw me with the bottles, their eyes livened and they reached and cried until it was in their hands, the milk a familiar lifeblood. Like a bottle to the boozer, they

sopped down the milk to the last sip. I gathered the empty bottles, bowls, and silverware and headed back to the kitchen. Placing them in the sink, I soaped a sponge and ran the water, ready to wash. Mary stopped me.

"Benja, I will do that later."

"I got it," I said.

"No, seriously, stop. Wash your hands and go play with the babies." She tugged at my shirt, so I obeyed. For the next hour, I entertained the toddlers as they wound down before their nap. Yvonne and Salomi took the babies in shifts to the diaper room for baths and diaper changes.

Before long, it was time for them to sleep. The infants went first - Moses, Sharron, Mary, and Daniel - away in their cribs, each tucked in, and each kissed and prayed over by the women before they slept. The same with the toddlers - Abu, Ethan, Stephen, Kate and Lance. We carried them back; Kate was practically asleep by the time I laid her down. One by one, we gathered and prayed for them and say goodnight. Ethan was the only one still chock full of energy. But in time, he too would succumb to sleep.

I asked Mary, on the off chance that it would be possible, if I could see Annette and maybe hold her before I left. She pondered a moment and excused herself to call Geoffrey and Elizabeth for permission. Apparently, they agreed because we she hung up, she smiled ear-to-ear and reached for my hand. She pulled into the kitchen and made me wash my hands, then led me on the same path Geoffrey had led me two days before: through the foyer, the door in the back, and down the short hallway to the darkened room.

Salomi was inside. She looked up at Mary then at me and said something I could not catch in Kiswahili. Mary responded and Salomi exited the room.

I looked over the incubator. Annette lay, eyes pinned to the ceiling with the same filmy cover over them. Mary put her hand on my shoulder, "Isn't she precious," she said. I nodded. She grabbed the side of the incubator with her hand. "We're taking her out today. She is healthy enough now to be with the rest. Salomi was just preparing for the switch." I grazed my finger over Annette's face. In this place of hope, she remained a liminal being, caught between the doldrums of the real world, a world she was so hastily thrown into, and her new home where she would be loved, wanted, enlivened. She blinked and cried out. "Do you want to hold her now?" Mary asked.

"Please." I stepped back and Mary lifted the little human out of the incubator, saying soft words of comfort.

"Take her by the head." She held out the baby and I slid my arm under the girl, my hand flat on her back. Annette cried out again. "You can walk with her if you like," Mary said. "But be sure to speak to her. The baby can sense your feelings. Say kind things and it will calm her."

I cuddled Annette with extreme delicacy. She barely fit in the bend of my arm; her tiny body would slip through if I were not careful. And just as she felt my warmth in feeling, I felt her coolness. Her eyes - blank, stagnant, black and resigned - were frozen from the moment she felt her abandonment, as if her soul were lost in Purgatory. I cooed at her, rocking her slowly in my arms. She cried. I walked out of the room and into the large, empty foyer by the kitchen, all along saying softly, "I love you. I love you. You are

home. You are wanted. I love you," the words streaming like notches from my mouth to her ears, tenderly beckoning a response. Her cries calmed and a warmth filled my body, from my arms to my shoulders and down into my toes. Annette blinked. As she opened her eyes, a sparkle of light shone off them and miraculously the lens lifted; she looked up at me; her eyes were flushed with color. "Mary," I called, "Come quickly." She ran from the Annette's room and around the corner, a scared look upon her face. I cried, "Look!" I held Annette out to face Mary. Mary gasped and put her hands over her mouth in disbelief. She walked slowly towards me and smiled at the baby.

"Hello, Annette. There you are." She rubbed her cheek. "I see you now." She called Salomi and the other women. They came through the kitchen and Mary announced, "Annette has joined our family." She pointed to the baby, and they gathered around me and looked down at her. Annette's eyes glimmered like diamonds, precious and perfect. They moved from face to face, and a vibrancy and fullness of life flooded the room.

I awake to a pillow smack in the face. I blink my eyes and hear Nyi laughing. She stands above, pillow in hand. "Oh, yeah," I say, and I jump up out of bed, slinging my pillow up with me. She runs across the room to the back door.

"Aha," she says, halting me. "It worked. You know I have been sitting here, trying to wake you for over twenty minutes."

"No I did not know that," I mimic her accent and bob my head mocking.

"You are a snorer, too." She smiles at me, and I go to the sink to wash off my face. "Come now, Benja. We need to secure our bus tickets."

"You are coming too," I ask.

"Of course. I told you this already. I am going to see my son, Scott." We exit her compound and walk down the dirt road, cross the train tracks, and wait along the road for a mutatu. A route twenty-two screeches in beside us and we board. The mutatu leads us into town; I pay our fare and we walk to the bus station. Nyi has her arm in mine, a sign of security. I guess she doesn't mind being seen with me.

We stop at a coffee shop for a quick bite to eat. She is so free with me now. Though she has been open from the start, there is something I see in her face, a light, more or less, that is welcoming and cheerful.

We walk to the station just down the road and purchase our bus tickets. Only five hundred shillings a piece. Every other bus is as much as a thousand. "It is because we will stop twice for pick ups on the way to Nairobi," Nyi says. "You see, they have not sold out the ride."

"What do we do until then?"

"We wait." The minutes pass like hours, and I take in every face, every exchange, every sight within my eye's reach. I want not to forget. I want to remember the little things, as in the way the sunlight now creeps up over the corner of an office building at the end of the street and glares into my eyes; as in the man with two types of shoes, one brown the other beige, riding his bike past us, a toboggan on his head, though I feel warm. The van pulls up in front of us. "That is ours," Nyi says. People come filing out

the side door, maybe twenty in all. The conductor leans his head out the window and yells something at another man, and a bell is rung. Wasting no time, we board.

I pick us seats in the back, almost impulsively from my school bus years. Nyi comes on with two large water bottles. "I got you something," She says.

"Why thank you," I return, and we are off. The van is half full as it rocks down the street and up a stretch of the highway out of town. Nyi busies herself in my journal, writing Kiswahili words for me to learn. Ahead, the highway is under construction and we are forced to detour on what used to be the only road leading into Nairobi from Nakuru. There are deep rifts and potholes that shake the van continuously, so much so that I can't even read my book. The words hop and jumble. It's like reading a word search puzzle. I put down the book, and Nyi and I chat. She says she is tired and attempts to sleep but the steady rock and rumble of the road keeps her from nodding off. "Take my shoulder," I say. She does. She leans on my shoulder and adjusts herself until she is comfortable. I stroke her hair gently and rub on her shoulder until I hear her steady sleep breath. How she is able to sleep in such turmoil, I wonder.

I stare out the window at a massive lake just a mile off the road. The sunlight dances off the waves of the water and reminds me of Annette's eyes, that moment of renewal. I think of my niece, Sophia Rose. She was born, eight pounds, six ounces, healthy and beautiful, a week after I entered Kenya. Had it been any different, had my sister died in labor and her husband left, had my family been smaller and my parents dead, it could have been the same for her as with Annette, thrown into a world of

rejection and of struggle. And it wouldn't matter if she were American or British or Japanese or Kenyan.

But Annette is all right now. She is one of the lucky few. Her birthright has been granted. She will grow and learn to talk and walk, and soon enough, she will be adopted into a loving family, given all the opportunities a child deserves. And what of her life, then, I wonder, when she grows older, through puberty and her teens, becoming a woman? What then, when she is Nyi's age? She may be safe now but nothing can shield her from pain, from suffering, from love and love lost, from life and all its incredulous weight.

I pull Nyi closer to me and rest my head on hers. We are ascending the plateau, nearing the top. The road ahead vanishes into the sky. I close my eyes. Like a video reel stuck on replay, I see the light come alive in Annette's eyes, over and over again. Her soul returned and that gives me hope, and with a measure of hope, nothing can break her.