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Airborne: A Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing & Writing for the Performing Arts

by

James Spencer Ingram

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John

Chapter One

Dying somewhere thirty-thousand feet above the Sahara was less than ideal, but it wasn't the worst thing that happened to John that day. Far from it.

There was the relentless heat, for starters, the humidity that kept coercing John to slide off his shades and wipe his forehead. He'd discovered that sweat was the real currency in West Africa, more ubiquitous and dependable than the bloated *céfa*. It circulated between parties in all transactions: the slack handshake between strangers and the firm-handshake-to-hug between acquaintances that John dubbed the *mon ami*. Those rich in perspiration bestowed their blessings on the less endowed and vice versa, until everyone was absolutely flush, the Westerners' affluence matched by the Nigerians, the Togolese, the Ivorians.

Signs of sweat opulence adorned the well-to-do—a chalk outline of expended salt ringing the back of a t-shirt, a baseball cap soaked completely through, a glistening pool of sunscreen and mosquito repellent brimming above the sternum. Water dripped down foreheads and over sunglasses to mottle the hot red sands packed into clay by barefoot children running alongside deflated soccer balls. The goats and donkeys foraging on grass sniffed at it, the *motos* honking their horns as they zoomed around corners ran over it.

John sat in the canoe crossing Lake Togo not contemplating the trip, but the heat, the sun burning through his brain since he'd stepped off the plane in Abidjan.

Actually, make that *before* he got off the plane in Abidjan—when the flight attendants opened the cabin door, beads of sweat had popped up on his forehead as soon

as the air met his skin. John had pulled the bill of his blue Red Sox cap down and sank lower in his leather seat. He'd lingered in the air conditioned plane for as long as he could, letting other passengers slink down the aisle before sighing and slipping on his backpack and heading out into the night. When he stepped onto the tarmac he'd cursed Lauren's parents for talking him into this trip—he would've returned "all expenses paid" with interest just to get back on that plane and fly back to civilization. But, you know, in-laws.

"Look, John, it's the least we could do," she'd said, echoing her dad. According to him, many things amounted to the least John could do after "stealing their daughter away to Texas"—returning to the Commonwealth for Memorial Day, the Fourth, the whole month of August (*what's the worry? We got a pullout in the basement*). This led to John giving in to that trip through the South, the Bore Tour, which then led him to vow to never go on a road trip with Lauren's parents again.

But after finally admitting that yes, he *was* a part of this family, and agreeing that yes, this technically wasn't a *road* trip, John found himself calling Lauren's dad and accepting his offer and stepping off a plane in Africa three months later.

Why hadn't he negotiated more fervently for a tour of Brussels and the canals of Bruges by way of Amsterdam? Who on Earth would *voluntarily* go to the Ivory Coast? But the shuttle was waiting, so John had trudged behind Lauren and her parents and stepped on board.

The breeze blowing off Lake Togo cut through the humidity and cooled him off a bit. John put his Sox cap and sunglasses back on and turned around to face the village of

Togoville. A big man named Jo-Jo stood on a platform at the stern of the small wooden boat, his nearly ebony skin pulled taut around his lats and delts as he poled the canoe across the water.

“Ça va, Jo-Jo?”

Jo-Jo grimaced through a stroke and pulled the twelve-foot wood pole from the lake. “Ça va, ça va, ça va.”

John pulled out his phone and squared up a picture of Jo-Jo. Togolese lined the shore behind the big man on the phone’s screen, some waving, some already wearing the t-shirts and shoes their tour group had left behind. The cement platforms behind them led up to a weathered stone wall, its engraved letters “T O G O V I L L E” no longer visible but there just the same. The wall opened onto the village’s only paved road, the concrete pushing uphill into town and collapsing into potholes here and there before finally splintering apart to give way to the red dirt. Square cinderblock dwellings and thatched huts clustered in haphazard shapes and patterns along the sides of the narrow dirt paths. Next to them the three-story Catholic church rose high behind stone walls, its Gothic spires and multicolored stained glass windows hiding from view the voodoo idols scattered throughout the village—the bedsheets that cloaked them for warmth, the dead chickens left for hope of rain or good news, of renewed health or money.

Jo-Jo smiled. John clicked the photo button and started to slip the phone back into the cargo pocket of his shorts.

Jo-Jo held out his left hand and beckoned. “See.”

John slapped the phone into the gulf of the man's palm. Jo-Jo scrolled back to the picture and nodded, still smiling.

“Bien?” John said.

“Oui, oui. Is good.” He handed the phone back to John and muscled the pole against the bottom of the lake.

John sat back down on the slat he shared with Lauren. She adjusted her red Texas Rangers cap and tucked a few loose strands of yellow hair behind her ear. “Get a good one?” She leaned her head against his shoulder and looked down at his phone, wrapping her leg behind his while he pulled up the image.

“Not too shabby,” he said.

“We've gotten a lot of good ones. I just might have to make a scrapbook run to Hobby Lobby when we get back.”

John stared up at the clear sky and rolled his eyes. “*Bor-ring.*” He squeezed her against him and kissed her left cheek.

“Bleh,” she said, sticking out her tongue but smiling. John laughed and kissed her again, then stole a glance back at Jo-Jo pushing their boat and the village retreating behind him. He tapped Lauren's dad on the shoulder. “How do you think he does it?”

Stan angled his head back in John's direction. His sideways glance was hidden by his huge wraparound shades, like the ones you get when the optometrist dilates your pupils. John could see the reddening pink of Stan's scalp, though, which couldn't be hidden from the sun by his horseshoe of silver hair nor the mesh backing of the lucky red cap he refused to discard for a more practical one. Stan had his arm around Myra, who

was bracing herself against the side of the boat and holding her stomach with her other arm. “Who? Joe?”

“Jo-Jo.”

“Right.” Stan had addressed Jo-Jo as “Joe” since the big Togolese had met up with their group in Accra to help their guide with the journey from Ghana into Togo, from the bustling capital of Lomé to the isolated village of Togoville—though both John and Stan agreed that Jo-Jo was brought along mostly so he could pole the boat across Lake Togo instead of their guide.

“‘Jo-Jo’ sounds like a name a plantation owner would call a little boy that he’d make dance jigs for his entertainment,” he’d said.

“Jesus, Stan,” Myra had said.

“What? It does.”

“But that’s his real name, Dad,” Lauren had said. “Not some kind of insult.”

“Still, though, whoever gave him that name knew what they were doing.”

“What about Jo-Jo White on the Celts?” John had asked. “I bet you didn’t call him ‘Joe.’”

“Jo-Jo was his nickname.”

“What’s the difference?”

“That *is* the difference.”

“So it’s offensive if it’s someone’s *actual* name,” Lauren had said, “but not if it’s the name someone gives them for short?”

“Look, you’re twisting it all around. I could swear I had a point about this.”

“Yeah, Dad, but your point doesn’t make sense.”

“Hondo called him Jo-Jo, so that’s good enough for me.”

John perked up. “So if Hondo called this guy Jo-Jo—

“Yes. It would. I got a feeling he’d agree with me on this. But unfortunately I don’t have Hondo on the goddam speed dial, so I can’t really say for sure.”

So, ‘Joe’ it was.

“I don’t know how he does it,” Stan said.

“You’d have to say,” John said, “With eight of us in the boat, that’s at least a thousand pounds.”

“Yeah.”

“And then add in all of our luggage, plus the boat itself, what are we looking at? Just under a ton?”

“At least.”

“And he’s pushing all that across the lake with a stinking pole.”

“Pretty remarkable.”

“I wish he’d push it a little smoother,” Myra said, and Stan patted her back. Her other hand was holding her blue “USA” visor and brown hair poof in place. John could see the spidery veins of her right thigh as she pushed against the boat, hiking up the leg of her khaki shorts.

John turned back to Lauren and showed her the picture. “I think I’m gonna miss this place.”

Lauren looked up at him from his shoulder. “You like it here now that we’re leaving?”

“I liked it the whole time.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Well, most of the time.”

“You said the same thing when we left Accra.”

“True.”

“And Abidjan.”

“That’s definitely *not* true.” The cultural and economical hub of the Ivory Coast had a beautiful skyline and much more to offer than an agrarian village like Togoville, but constant eighty-percent humidity almost drove John to murder. “But this place had its own kind of charm. Especially the people.”

“It’s so *hot* here,” Lauren mimicked. “Don’t these people know what freaking *century* we’re living in?”

“Do you think your bag will float?” John grabbed the left strap of her backpack and held it out over the lake. Lauren goosed him.

“Ho!” Jean yelled from the front of the boat. He was a tall, rail-thin Ivorian from Abidjan. His wide, straight, white smile belied his dark skin, though his wasn’t as dark as Jo-Jo’s. He’d worn a handful of football jerseys throughout the ten-day trip: the Barcelona half-crimson-half-blue Messi; the Real Madrid white with three black stripes down the sleeves Ronaldo; the Liverpool all-red Gerrard; and, of course, the Cote D’Ivoire all-orange Didier Drogba. These jerseys were paired with faded khaki shorts

with frayed ends, hung loose around his pole-like thighs, and rubber-soled sandals with straps.

Though he looked like a typical West African, the Ivorian doubled as a godsend for the quartet's tour of the Gulf of Guinea: fluent in French, Dioula, and Ewe, and—above all—conversational with English. As arranged by the stateside travel agency, he'd met them at the baggage claim in Abidjan while smiling and pointing at his "Jones" sign.

"Yes?" he'd said.

"How'd you guess?" Stan had asked.

Jean laughed. "It is easy. You four are the only yovos in here."

"I guess sarcasm is the first thing lost in translation, huh?"

Jean continued smiling and shrugged, so apparently sarcasm wasn't the only thing lost in translation. "My name is Jean."

John extended his right hand. "Je m'appelle John, aussi."

Jean dropped the sign and clapped. "Trés bien! Vous parlez Français avec moi?"

John had taken three semesters of French in college. Nine years ago. "Un peu, un peu."

"Oui, un peu, bien."

"I hate to interrupt this connection, here," Stan had said, "but we've been on a plane for eight hours and I think it's something like midnight here."

"Ah, yes, yes, we go. There is bus waiting outside."

The bus waiting outside was a yellow van parked about two hundred yards from the terminal. Two young men and the driver waited next to it. One of the youths climbed

atop the van while the other lifted the group's luggage overhead and pressed it upward. The one on top of the van stacked the bags along the roof and fastened a net around the luggage pile before hopping down. Jean handed them each five thousand céfa. John laughed and took a picture of the overloaded van with his phone. He leaned over to show it to Lauren but she and her parents were standing agape.

Jean smiled. "Very strong." The driver started up the van.

"Those bags aren't going to fall off as soon as we drive away, are they?" asked Stan.

"No, no, they safe. Let's go to hotel." The road-weary travelers had then piled into the van and placed their well being for the next ten days into the hands of their new associate, whose services only cost about fifty bucks a day. Plus expenses, of course.

Every passenger in the small wooden boat lurched forward as it banked into the far side of the lake. "We are here," Jean said. He hopped out onto the sand and began directing the three men from Togoville to unload the bags.

John watched them attack the luggage piled in the front of the boat. Neither of the three men were as tall as Jo-Jo or even Jean, but they still didn't lack for size, their broad shoulders stretching their mesh shirts. Two wore nearly identical black Under Armour, but one sported a green Nigerian football warmup. All three had bald heads, thin moustaches, and no desire to communicate with the rest of the group save for brisk nods.

Jo-Jo handed the pole to one of the men and stepped into the shin-deep water. He extended a hand to Myra, who was finally sitting upright. When she took his hand and stepped onto the lip of the boat, Jo-Jo put his other arm behind her legs and hoisted her

into the air. She yelped in surprise, but the big Togolese didn't seem to notice as he carried her through the shallows and set her down on the beach.

He waded back to the boat and held out his arms to Lauren, who gladly let herself be whisked away to dry land. Jo-Jo returned to the boat and repeated his offer to John and Stan, who promptly took off their shoes and socks.

The brown, brackish water rendered the lake bottom invisible, so the two men tightroped along the slat benches to where the remaining luggage was stacked in the front of the boat. Holding their shoes in one hand, they steadied themselves with their other and lowered their left feet into the ankle-deep water.

Jo-Jo laughed. "It no bite."

"Yeah, but crocodiles do," Stan said.

Jo-Jo erupted. "C'est vrai," he laughed.

"Then why are you guys moving so slow?" Lauren asked. John and Stan glanced at each other and stepped completely into the water, sloshing their way onto the beach.

Jean shook John's free hand and pulled him in close, slapping his back. "Mon ami."

"Oui, oui," John said, stiffening. "Mon ami."

* * *

Lauren snatched a plastic one-and-a-half liter water bottle from her pack and took a long pull. She handed it to John, who did the same as they high-kneed it through the beach's deep sands to the dirt road at the crown of the hill. A yellow VW bus sat on the

road next to a weathered gazebo decaying in the brush. He could've sworn it was the exact same bus from the beginning of their trip.

The three men in mesh had already begun repeating the baggage-loading technique the group had witnessed numerous times since the Abidjan airport. John and the three others stood watching, though, the two women snapping pictures, the two men inching bags nearer to the van and trying to insert another cog into the assembly line.

“Why don't you boys go clean your feet off over there?” Myra said, pointing to the dilapidated gazebo.

“What, is there a hose in there or something?” John said. Stan glanced at him. “Oh, right.”

“No, but you could brush some sand off and make do until we get to the airport,” Lauren said.

John glanced at his wife's feet. “Yours look fine, so what did you do?”

Lauren pointed at Jo-Jo, who was putting his shirt back on. He smiled and nodded.

“Of course. How could I forget your knight in shining armor?” John and Stan shuffled over to one of the benches in the gazebo. They took out the socks they'd stuffed into their shoes before exiting the canoe and started using them to brush off the bottoms of their feet. Jean hustled over.

“Wait, wait, mes amis.” He squatted down and began slapping the sand from their toes and feet.

Stan started to object. “Really, Jean, that's not necessary.”

“No, no, this way, socks not dirty, inside not dirty.” He looked up at John. “Oui?”

“Oui, oui.” Jean had elected to wear his Barça Messi jersey for the last day of the trip. John considered making a joke about a West African sporting a football jersey adorned with “UNICEF,” but then thought better of it. He took another swig of water once their guide had finished sprucing him up, and offered some to Stan who declined. John set the bottle down on the bench so he could slip back into his Asics. The sand was mostly gone, though not all, and a few more resilient grains adhered to the thin webbing between his toes and burrowed under his nails. John thought about oysters while he wandered back to the bus, wondering if the remnant lake water would combine with the general sticky funk of his feet to coat the delinquent grains of sand with a sort of nacre, so that his socks would be swimming with pearls when he pulled them off at the Lomé airport.

“Lauren?” John said.

“Yeah?”

“I think I’ll go with sandals from here on out.”

John handed Lauren his socks and shoes and took his flip-flops from her, dusted his feet and slid them on then walked toward the van.

Jean squeezed John’s shoulder before he could climb into the van. “Mon ami, we no go this way.”

“I thought we were going to the airport.”

“Oui, oui, we go, but later.”

John looked back at Stan. “What is he talking about?”

“Yeah, what’s going on?” Myra asked.

Stan stood up from the bench and smiled. “Jean and I arranged a surprise excursion for you guys.”

“An *excursion*? Where? We’re on our way to the airport.”

Stan looked down at his watch. “Our flight’s not ‘till 10:30, so we got about six hours to spare.”

“How can you be sure? You know how time works around here.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“How? Do you know where it is?”

“It’s not very far from here.”

“No too far,” Jean chimed in. His smile had given way to concern. He raised his eyebrows at Stan. “But we no go, if you want. Save time.”

“No, we’re going. C’mon, I know you’re all going to be glad we went.”

Myra exhaled and crossed her arms. “Fine, as long as we don’t get stuck in Lomé overnight. So, where are we going?”

“We’re going to see a house that was used for the slave trade.”

John remembered again why he’d been hesitant to go on this trip—other than the whole flying to third-world countries thing. A year ago, just after John had stolen Lauren away to Texas, the four of them had embarked on a roaming tour of Civil War sites in the South, Stan’s latest obsession since retiring from Boston’s Bravest eighteen months prior. He and Lauren had flown into Atlanta from Dallas and met up with her parents for a week-long journey from Stone Mountain to Andersonville Prison to Vicksburg, touching

antique cannons and reading a multitude of roadside plaques and listening to park rangers preach of the South's tenacity in the face of overwhelming odds, even to the end. And all in a minivan, of course.

When John begrudgingly accepted Stan's offer for he and Lauren to tagalong to Africa, Stan's voice had brightened over the phone even though he'd said he didn't think they'd come because he wasn't sure if they could hack it in the rough. But he agreed with their choice, that it would be good for everyone to have a chance to "see living history." John wasn't sure what he meant at the time, but now it all made sense—another historical niche trip. He suspected that this excursion might even be the only reason they'd come to this broken-down continent.

"You're kidding, right?" Myra asked.

"No, honey, it's going to be great. It's part of their history, a national landmark for Chrissake."

"So, Dad, you're telling me we can't fit in visiting Lagos but we have time for this shit?" Lauren said.

"*Lauren.*" Myra said.

"We've been over this," Stan said, "we were never going to Nigeria in the first place."

"But it's one of the biggest cities in the world. It's, like, three times the size of Abidjan."

"Sounds wonderful," John said.

Lauren slapped the bill of his cap. “I just don’t get why we wouldn’t want to see it while we’re here.”

Stan glanced at Jean. “Hey, should we have gone in to Lagos?”

Jean tsk-tsk-tsk’d. “No, Lagos is no good for Joneses. Four nice yovos—sorry, *Americains*—shouldn’t want to go there. Abidjan much safer.”

“And cooler, I’m sure,” added John, removing his shades and wiping his brow again.

Stan looked back at Lauren and shrugged.

“I’m still waiting for a good reason,” Myra said.

Stan put his arm around her. “Remember all the voodoo stuff you were so interested in when we went to New Orleans?”

“Yeah, but—

“Well, all of that came from here, where we’ve been, a long time ago. Don’t you want to see how it got there?”

Myra patted her hair down and looked back at the bus. “I think I’d rather make the flight.”

John laughed.

Stan exhaled and looked up at the sky. “We’re *not* going to miss the damn flight.”

Myra pursed her lips.

John smirked at Lauren and looked over at Stan, who was staring down the dirt road leading into the bush. Their guide glanced between Myra and Stan from the rear

bumper of the van. John adjusted his cap and walked over to Stan. “I think we should go.”

“*Babe.*”

“What? We’re here, we might as well.”

Stan smiled and clapped John on the back.

“Why?” Lauren continued.

“Because—” Stan began.

“*Stanley.*”

Stan stepped next to Myra. John looked over at Stan and then back at Lauren.

“Because it’ll be fun.”

“Fun?”

John flashed her a grin. “Informative?”

Lauren exhaled and crossed her arms just like her mom, glaring at John and then her dad. “Fine,” she said, and stomped over to the van.

“No, we’re not taking the van,” Stan said, pointing behind it. “See?”

Four black Honda *motos* rested on their kickstands in the dirt road, the three men from Togoville standing among them.

“We’re taking those?” Myra said.

“Yes.”

“But what about our bags? What are we going to do with them?”

“They’re going to stay on top of the van. Joe’s going to drive it and meet us there at the house.”

“Jo-Jo,” John said.

Stan glared at him. “Right.”

Jean nudged John and pointed at the van. “Jo-Jo conduit le bus, oui?”

John nodded. “Oui, il conduit.”

Jean clapped. “Bien. You knew un peu Français, but now more, maybe.”

“Oui, oui,” John said, looking away.

“So why don’t we just go in the van, then,” Lauren asked.

“Bus take too long on this road. We take motos faster, then bus arrive when we’re done.”

“See?” said Stan.

“Fine,” the other three *yovos* said in unison. Jo-Jo climbed into the VW and cranked the engine, which needed a little coaxing to turn over. The three other Togolese jumped onto the motorbikes and kickstarted their ignitions. Jean ambled over to the fourth moto.

“See, four motos for four Joneses.” He directed John toward his motorbike. “C’est parfait, oui?”

Stan, Myra, and Lauren were already straddling one of the motos behind a Togolese. John slid behind the Ivorian. Back in the States, John wouldn’t have ever, ever ridden behind another man on any kind of motorcycle or motorbike for a variety of uneasy and mostly homophobic reasons, though at least these motos offered small rails below the rear seat for him to hold onto rather than hug around Jean’s waist.. But he’d gotten over this conceit during the first day when confronted with the same choice

multiple times: walk three to five miles in the heat of the day or hop onto the back of a moto, white knuckles and closed eyes, sure, but the wind blew through your hair and cooled the skin. By day three he'd forgotten there'd even been a choice in the first place.

John tapped Jean on the shoulder and then grasped below his seat. "Allez."

"Hold strong, mon ami!" shouted the Ivorian and they sped down the dirt road, bounding over numerous bumps and leading the party deeper into the jungle.

* * *

The slaver house was located in a village about twenty miles from Lake Togo as the moto flies and set apart by an eight-foot wooden fence. John hopped off the bike once it came to a complete stop in front of the gate. The three Togolese returned the *merci's* or *au revoir's* yelled in their ears by Lauren, Myra, and Stan with *pad quoi* or *bonsoir* and buzzed back toward the boats to Togoville. Jean lowered the kickstand on his and John's moto and led the foursome through the gate and into the slave house's compound.

An open-air souvenir hut stood off to the left. Its proprietor watched John enter and walk through the dirt courtyard, just like the rest of the villagers milling about within the gates. Half-naked children chased footballs and chickens and each other. Three men wearing vibrant *dashikis* sat around a table drinking beer in a small café across the courtyard from the house, their loose pants matching the yellow and purple and sky blue patterns of their shirts. An old woman in a long brown skirt and headdress knelt before a water pump and sluiced water into a white five-gallon bucket.

The adobe house consisted of two floors, though the lower floor was merely a basement. Two wide columns straddled a front stone staircase, which was flanked by two

identical staircases extending both left and right off the front door. The roof, long since collapsed and ruined, had been replaced with sheets of corrugated tin.

A large, bald man wearing khakis and a white dress shirt approached them as they walked up to the house.

“Bonsoir,” he said. “My name is Goodluck, and I’m here to say that we are so honored that you are here and would like to learn about this place of history.” He crossed his hands in front of himself and assumed a tour-guide pose, so the group encircled him and made eye contact intently, including Jean. Goodluck’s skin was a milky brown, much lighter than Jo-Jo or Jean or the Togolese or any other West African that the group had encountered on their journey thus far.

“This house was built in 1823,” he said, “twenty-three years after the British abolished the practice of slavery in their empire. This house was built on this ground because it is far away from ocean. No ships could see it, yes? It was built here because slave trade kept going, kept going illegalwise. It kept going because even though there were no proper slaves in this hemis—hemisphere, slaves were being bought in America and West India.

“These slavers were first Portuguese. They would steal people from villages at least, maybe, fifty kilometers from here. They would raid families’ huts and snatch up who they could, or they would hide in a farmer’s crops and wait and wait and then grab him when he wasn’t looking. Then they would bring them here.” He pointed to the basement of the house. John leaned over and stared at the basement, then turned back to Goodluck. He wiped his forehead and cleared his throat.

“The worst part, though, is coming. Many times tribes would make war with other tribes and then sell away prisoners to Europeans. Sometimes, the slavers’ guides in this land—you know that whenever you come to somewhere, somewhere where you not speak the language or know the land, you must have native guide—well, these local men would lead their bosses to camps they could slave for money or goods or favors. And *sometimes*, mothers and fathers would sell one or two children, or three, for a few goats, for bolt of cloth, for barrel of whiskey.”

Lauren gasped. John pulled her closer.

Stan laughed. “Hey, I considered doing the same thing when you were two.”

Myra elbowed him in the ribs. Goodluck glanced at him quizzically.

“Sorry,” Stan said, making a *proceed* gesture with his right hand. “As you were.”

“All were brought back here,” Goodluck continued. He pointed again at the basement, and everyone looked again. “They never saw the first floor. They crawled in and out of the basement through those, which were locked from outside after.” He pointed to the three arched openings in the foot of the basement spaced fifteen feet apart. Two had been boarded up, though one opened into darkness. It looked like a human-sized cartoon mouse hole.

Goodluck waited for the group to return their attention. “Sometimes they were made to live inside the basement for a few days. Sometimes they were made to live inside the basement for a few weeks until a ship had come. They had no blankets for cold nights so they slept all together, one pile. No light except for holes. Sometimes they died.”

“Man,” John said, shaking his head. “Crazy.”

Goodluck nodded. “Yes, very crazy. Well, I want to say thank you again for coming to this country and for learning history. If you have no questions to keep the talk going, we can go inside house now.”

“If this house is so far from the coast and so secret,” John said, “how did it get discovered?”

Goodluck smiled. “Everything gets found out, yes? One way or other? This house was discovered this way: in 1852, a British patrol walked down the same trail you take just now and found a wounded, well-dressed Portuguese man running at them. They tell him to stop and he keeps running, so they shoot him down.

“They follow trail until they find this house. No fires, no lights, no other Portuguese, it is abandoned. But sounds coming from basement. Bad sounds. They open the door in the floor to something terrible: three Portuguese men are down with the slaves, but they are being eaten. One is still alive, I think.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Lauren said.

“Most believe that the Portuguese captured a cannibal tribe for mistake, and then a fight happen in house and Portuguese lose. Or maybe the slaves no eat for too many weeks or months and took what food they could grab. Everyone agree that lone Portuguese that ran away shut them in the basement.”

“So what happened, then?” Stan asked, his hands on his hips in that Peter Pan pose John couldn’t stand.

“The British patrol shoot them all for being such murdersome savages. They think no one should do such things, even if they have been held over Hell. Now, do you have more questions to keep the talk going?”

Everyone’s curiosity seemed to have been satisfied.

“Good, we go into the house now.”

John tried to parse the French on the plaque attached to the side of the main staircase. Jean sidled up and nudged him.

“Français, oui? Vous lisez?”

John squinted. “Seems legit.”

Jean laughed. “Un peu, un peu.” He made his way up the steps and into the house.

The front room was musty and dark inside, dust covering the long oak dining table on the left and the loose floorboards that bounced with their steps. Some two-by-fours had been strewn about the floor to cover holes or even weaker boards. A large trapdoor begged to be opened in the center of the floor. There were doorways opening off each back corner of the front room, but no one seemed to feel the urge to explore.

“Has any work been done to the inside of the house since 1852?” Stan whispered to Jean. He shook his head. Stan led Myra onto one of the two-by-fours. Goodluck cleared his throat again and gestured at the dining table.

“This is where the men sat drinking their fine wine and eating fine food. Gambling, laughing. Sometimes enjoying a woman they had stolen. They do this while the people below had nothing but listening. And these people, the Portuguese men and then some African, they not care about the people below, they not feel bad about all their

eating and drinking and gambling because they feel that keeping the people below was best preparation for their voyage ahead.

“If the people up here need to give orders or feel like throwing down food, they opened this door.” Goodluck creaked open the trapdoor and looked into its absence. “Now, you have chance to go down and see what it was like for slave. You can see what it was like so you will know, and then when you go back in America you can tell people so they will know. These are things every people should know.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Lauren.

“When are you going to get another chance to do something like this?” Stan said.

“If we’d gone to Lagos, then maybe I’d’ve done it.”

Stan laughed. “I figured a Ranger fan would be too much of a baby to go in.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “It’s just a hat, Dad. I don’t even watch baseball.”

“Sure.”

“Rangers? Queens Park?” said Jean.

John patted his shoulder. “Other Rangers, but just as bad.” He glanced over at Stan. “C’mon, Stan, it’s just a hat.”

“Fine, fine.” Stan looked at Myra quizzically, nodded at the trapdoor.

“Absolutely not.”

“Suit yourself. I’m up for experiencing new stuff.”

“We all went to *Africa*, Dad.”

Stan creaked over the boards to the trapdoor and sat on the edge of the hole. He glanced back at Jean. "I'm guessing this basement hasn't been touched since 1852, either."

Jean chuckled and shook his head again.

"We want experience to be very realistic," Goodluck said.

"You certainly do. Jean, you watch over our women. John, let's go."

John looked down at the hole and then looked back at Lauren, who was shaking her head.

"Well?" Stan said, looking back.

John shrugged at Lauren and tiptoed over.

Goodluck shone a flashlight into the hole. "It's a seven-foot drop, about. When you get down, you cannot walk up-straight. Move to the right and then follow the path until you get to the wall, then crawl through hole to outside. Just like slaves do."

"Clear as mud," Stan said. "I'll see you on the other side." He lowered himself down into the hole and crouched underneath the floor.

"Okay?" John asked.

"It's dark as shit down here."

Jean and Goodluck laughed loudly. John waited on the edge of the hole.

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to, baby," Lauren said.

"Yes he does," Stan yelled, further away. "I'm not doing this shit by myself."

"That's more than enough, Stanley Jones."

Stan huffed, a bit further away than before. “You better hurry up, I’m almost to the end here.”

Jean nudged John’s shoulder. “Mon ami...”

John jumped down into the hole and staggered to his left, ducking just before busting his head on the landing. Patches of sweat instantly blossomed in his red t-shirt, in his shoulders, back, and armpits. His face and hair were drenched. He sucked in a mouthful of dead air and tried to cough.

“Stan?” he gasped.

“I’m already out,” he said. “You’ll be okay, just follow the light to the end.”

All John could see were columns and shadows, shadows lurking behind columns. The stale air cloyed at his face and chest. “This is a bad place.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Look, just follow my voice, okay? Once you get around that first column you’ll see the sunlight from the hole.”

John started creeping through the dimness, hunched over more than necessary, holding his breath.

“Remember to go to your right first.”

John panicked. He tried turning around, but couldn’t move because he was afraid of disorienting himself even further. Every beam looked identical, every wall was left. The air got thicker, somehow. He stared down at the dirt floor and tried to remember what direction he’d turned when he came down, right, left, right, left, right, left, he

started breathing faster, just get out, get out you idiot, you have to get out of here you'll be stuck down here with this dirt and darkness and dead air forever—

“Okay?” John looked up from the floor and to his right. Goodluck was hanging upside-down in the trapdoor shaft.

John took off his hat and slid a hand over his forehead and hair. “Fine.”

“Okay.” Goodluck gestured to his right with the flashlight. “This way.” He slipped back up the hatch like a ghost.

John staggered back to the trapdoor opening and side-stepped along the right of the column. He shuffled down the path in the dirt between the beams, his head inches from the creaking ceiling. The air made his lungs heave more the further he went, but the sunlight promised by the exit ahead made the going easier.

“I can hear you coming, you're doing good,” yelled Stan. “You're almost there.”

“Okay.”

“One last right turn and you'll see the hole.”

John spied the last beam in the dimness and braced himself against it, looking to the right. The hole waited at the bottom of the far wall, an oval of yellow light extending through its opening. Darkness pooled on either side of the opening, offset by the light and seemingly deeper than elsewhere in basement dungeon. John looked down and noticed he couldn't see the floor.

“You made it.”

John kept looking for the floor. “Not really.”

“Just have to crawl from here.”

“Oh is that all?”

Stan’s face appeared sideways in the hole, which John noticed was also about thirty feet away. “Don’t freak out, that won’t help anything.”

“Get out of the damn light.”

Stan’s face disappeared from the hole. His disembodied voice said “You can do it. You can.”

“Okay.”

“Waiting’s just going to make it worse.”

“*Okay.*”

“Okay.”

John staggered through the final three steps he had space for and sunk to floor and commenced crawling. Out of practice, he might’ve wondered if he was doing it right if he wasn’t consumed with what his hand might land on with each step. He fought the urge to look down at his hands, kept his neck rigid and pointed straight at the light ahead.

Then something scurried across his right heel. His inertia stopped, he’d run into an immovable object. He thought immediately of the large brown tarantula he and Lauren had seen in a corner of their hotel room’s ceiling one night in Accra. They’d watched it for hours, not daring to move. John had stayed up all night with the lamp on, jerking awake whenever he felt his head sag to make sure it was still there. He couldn’t last, though, and had sunk into an uncomfortable sleep at four a. m. When he snorted awake at six the spider was gone.

They'd looked under the bed, behind the pillows, in the shower, in the toilet, in their shoes. They'd emptied their bags. Nothing.

"It probably went under our balcony door," John had said. So they stuffed towels into the doorjams and felt safer, that the spider was really gone. But they never really knew.

And now it was in this hellish basement. John thought it had been waiting here ever since. He clawed into the dirt and dashed on all fours as fast as he could for the light, no longer caring what he thrust his hands into. He could feel his heartbeat, and sweat poured down his face from his forehead and stung his eyes. He kept going because he could still make out the light, because the tarantula had to be racing after him. He was only a few feet away, just three handfuls of dirt until he'd be in the light and fresh air and salvation.

John's right palm came down on something sharp. A searing pain entered his hand, and he thought he'd heard something snap. He cried out and scrambled through the opening and rolled over onto his back.

"Jesus, what happened?"

John was heaving and holding his left hand against his chest, his right hand aloft.

"Something bit me in there."

"*Bit you?*"

The rest of the party hurried down the front staircase and met them in the courtyard. "What happened?" Lauren asked. "Are you okay?"

"Something bit him."

“*Bit him?*”

“Look,” John said, remaining on the ground. He waved his right hand. Blood trickled down his palm and forearm, and something white and grimy and foul-smelling jutted from the wound. Lauren and Myra ran over to inspect the injury.

“Oh my God,” Lauren said, “I think that’s a tooth.”

“What?” John wrenched his hand away and held it in front of his face. He picked at the dirty shard lodged in his hand, wincing, until it came loose. It was a tooth, or part of one. “Holy shit.”

Stan glared at Goodluck. “What in the hell is in there? What did that?”

Goodluck held up his hands. “Nothing, nothing.”

John peered through his fingers and over Lauren’s head at Stan. Sweat ran down his forehead and face, dripping from his ridiculous shades as he looked from John to Goodluck. “I mean, I wouldn’t have sent him crawling through there in the dark with something that could do *that* to him.”

Goodluck removed a handkerchief from his khakis and dabbed his forehead. “There’s nothing, I show you.” He walked toward the basement opening, followed closely by Stan. Goodluck shone his flashlight in the hole and peered inside. “Nothing.”

“Look again,” Lauren said.

Jean paced in the courtyard. John remained on the ground, staring at his new tooth. Goodluck continued to scan with his flashlight. “Nothing, nothing—wait.” He reached inside the hole and brought something out in his left hand. Stan lurched backward.

John got up and joined the others gathering around to see what Goodluck had rescued from the abyss. He was holding a small skull, yellowed with age and browned with dirt and grime. Its teeth bore the same coloration, with a thick, ragged brown residue coating the upper row. The right incisor was broken in half diagonally.

“What’s that stuff on its teeth?” Lauren asked, eyes wide.

“I think it’s just dirt,” John said.

“*Sang.*” Jean had stopped pacing and was staring at the ground, arms crossed. He looked up at the group. “C’est le sang.”

Stan held out his hand and Goodluck cradled the skull into his palm. He grabbed John’s wrist and turned over his hand. He studied the mouth of the skull, then the wound, then the skull once more.

Stan shook his head and glanced up at Goodluck. “*Very realistic.*”

Chapter Two

John sat in the red dirt outside the compound staring at his hand. He rested his sunglasses on top of his cap to get a better look at the red incision the tooth had lanced in his right palm. It didn't really hurt. A dull ache, maybe. A slow throb. Just a red spot about the size of a dime. John wondered how deep it went, slid his left thumb along his palm toward the slit.

"Don't," said Lauren, next to him, who'd been watching the wound just as intently. "You want to spread the infection around?"

"That's exactly what I want to do."

Lauren lowered her shades on her nose. "I'm serious."

"What infection? These are only my germs we're talking about."

"You don't *know* that, though."

"Of course I do. Me and Stan took care of it."

"Oh, you mean the Wet Wipes?"

John nodded. He'd grown accustomed to the idea of taking a Wet Wipe shower during their two-day journey to Africa from the States. The first one had felt gross, and when he finished gave him the sensation of being less clean than before. The second one sent his pits to moist, lemon-scented heaven. So, when he'd gotten over that initial shock of being bitten on his crawl from the basement *de mort* and thought about cleaning the mostly harmless wound—and seeing that the slavehouse water pump wasn't really a viable option—John figured a Wet Wipe ought to do the trick.

Lauren didn't share his enthusiasm. She stood and moved away.

“Where are you going?” John asked.

“I’m getting the Neosporin,” she said, rifling through her backpack. “Unless you left that behind, too.”

John turned his attention back to his palm. Before he’d opted for the Wet Wipe panacea, Lauren had searched the front compartments and side mesh pockets of both of their packs for the giant water bottle. To try and wash out the wound first, at least, before anything unwanted could settle in. She’d come up empty, though, and sat back on her haunches, resigned. And Stan and Myra had put theirs in the cooler in the back of the van so they could have it on the drive, because you just never knew how long you could get stuck in African traffic, kids.

“Tell me you didn’t forget the water.”

John had looked down at her, holding his hand, wincing a little. She slid a strand of hair behind her ear. He’d almost said *You didn’t forget the water* paired with a grin but thought much better of it, just nodded *affirmative*, that the water bottle was sweating back at the decrepit gazebo. Half-full, probably. When she’d been shaking her head for longer than five seconds he turned around so he wouldn’t have to watch anymore. He could still feel it, though.

“I didn’t leave anything else behind.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.” He pressed his thumb against the “bite,” if it could be called that, which actually now fascinated him more than frightened him. While he’d laid in the dirt and held his hand he’d wondered what the odds of that were, that he’d cut his hand on an

almost two hundred year old skull so far from home. Well, he hoped it was that old, rather than something fresher.

Lauren returned carrying the little orange antibacterial tube.

“See?” he said.

She slapped it into his palm and resumed digging through their medicine bag for bandages. John watched her shift the items around in the overstuffed ziploc bag, looking for the small box of various-sized bandages depicting Spongebob Squarepants in a variety of poses that he’d picked up at Target as a joke.

“They’re right there,” John said, pointing. Lauren didn’t look, just kept sizing up boxes and pill bottles while plunging her hand deeper into the bag. “There,” he said, again.

Lauren upended the freezer bag and shook its contents into the dirt. The aspirin bottles and malaria pill sheets and digestive enzymes and probiotics and dramamine drops and anti-nausea prescriptions wormed their way out of the bag in three chunks, with the bandages bringing up the rear. She grabbed the box and sat back down next to John, holding it out to him. He didn’t take it.

Jean stared at the medicines scattered on the ground while leaning against the compound fence and forcefully whispering Ewe into his Blackberry. He sported his wide smile again, but his eyes and voice didn’t convey the same message. Myra walked over and bent down to scoop the medicines into the bag.

“Just leave it, Mom.”

John leaned over to Lauren. “Look, I’m okay. So what’s the matter?”

“I guess nothing, then.”

John sighed. “C’mon, Lauren.”

“No, it’s fine.” She stared at her hands. “You’re okay, so nothing’s the matter.”

Myra slid the re-packed bag next to Lauren and then retreated back to Stan and the compound fence.

“Look, Babe, it’s going to be—

“How? I mean, how do you know? That’s the problem—why can’t you be more concerned about this?”

“I am concerned.”

“No you’re not. Or my Dad. It’s like I’m the only one who can understand that having an open wound in Africa *might* be a bad thing.”

“I meant that I’m concerned *enough*.”

“Well, it doesn’t show. Didn’t you see those AIDS warning posters in Togoville? What if you got that somehow?”

“You think I got *AIDS* from a moldy skull in that basement?” John said, thumbing behind himself at the house.

“Who knows? It could be something worse.”

“What in the hell could be worse than AIDS?”

“*I don’t know*. But I know a fucking Wet Wipe probably wouldn’t take care of it.”

John leaped up and raised his hands in the air. “What can I do about it, huh? Like you said, I have an open wound in *fucking Africa*.” He gestured at their surroundings.

Three children kicking a soccer ball down the street who'd stopped to watch the *yovos* fight glanced around, looking for what made him so mad.

Stan took a step away from the fence but Myra put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back. John looked in their direction when he heard the *thud*, but then turned back to Lauren glaring up at him.

“Look, what I mean is what could I have done?”

“You could've remembered the water bottle.”

John exhaled. “Yeah, I could've remembered the water bottle. But I didn't, so...what else? We can't clean it with their water, so I'll have to wash it out when we get to the airport and can buy another one.” He sat down next to her. “We just have to make do until then with what we got, but it's not like I like it any more than you, okay?”

“I know.” She pursed her lips and touched his arm, leaned against him. “I'm ready to go home.”

“Me too. We'll get there.”

“Let's hurry. I wouldn't mind sitting in the terminal for four hours.”

John smiled. “Okay.”

“I'm sorry I cussed at you.”

John smirked and lowered his head against hers. “No, you're not.”

“You're right, I'm not.”

“Me neither.” He kissed her forehead. Lauren slid down into the crook of his neck. Jean stopped talking on his Blackberry and walked over to address the group.

“Jo-Jo is coming in bus soon.”

Stan and Myra stood behind John and Lauren. “How soon?” Stan said. “We kind of have an urgent situation, here.”

“Yes, yes. Is fine.” Jean started playing on his blackberry. “Not much longer.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “You’ll be okay,” he said, nodding at John.

“I think so, we just need to get to the airport—oh, shit.” John had left a sticky, bloody amoeba on Lauren’s t-shirt when he’d removed his hand from her shoulder—he’d forgotten to bandage his wound in his haste to argue and then make up with his wife.

“What?” Lauren said, looking around. She followed John’s stare to his hand and her eyes widened. Blood was pouring from the wound, which was now the size of a nickel. “Jesus, Babe. I thought you’d got the bleeding stopped.”

“I did,” he said. The bottom of John’s red t-shirt darkened as he held it against his hand. “It wasn’t going like this earlier, it stopped after a few minutes.”

“It wasn’t this deep of a cut,” Stan said.

“What the hell does that matter, Dad? It’s seems to be pretty deep now.”

“Somebody do something!” John said. The other three gathered around him, leaning in but doing nothing. What could they do? Blood began to drip, drip, drip from his hand and shirt onto the ground, mixing with the red clay which seemed to envelop it, swallow it hungrily. “Somebody get this thing to turn off!”

Stan reached over and squeezed John’s wrist to try and lessen the bloodflow. Nothing. He squeezed harder. John wrenched his wrist away from him.

“Wait,” Jean said. He grabbed one of the tattered edges of his shorts and ripped off a long strip from around his left leg. He took John’s wrist and wrapped the cloth

around his palm three times, tying it off in a tight knot on top of his hand. The makeshift khaki bandage turned a dull red at the point of the wound, but it was thick enough to keep the blood from running over the sides and onto the ground.

“Are you sure that’ll hold up?” John asked, turning his hand from side to side.

“Huh?”

“Will it stay?”

“Ah-ha, yes, will it stay, it will stay.” Jean pulled his Blackberry out again and dialed. “Should. Should stay.”

Stan started to voice his concern but John held up his left hand and shook his head, jutting out his lower lip to say *this ’ll do*. Comme ci comme ça. He turned to give a thumbs up to Jean and say “D’accord” but he was already turned around, shouting quickly in Ewe.

“How’re you feeling?” Stan said.

“I think I’m okay.” Truthfully, he mostly felt embarrassed about the whole thing, from the basement freakout to being rescued by Jean’s shorts. And what had happened on this sidetrip was weird, fucking *insane*, maybe. But he’d known eventually they’d get to the shitty Lomé airport and clean the wound, which would heal into a gnarly scar that’d become an intro for another of his and Lauren’s litany of *That’s Africa* stories they’d tell at boring parties or on double dinner dates with young couple X.

Now, seeing his blood pour out onto the ground was something else entirely. In an instant he’d tried to calculate how much he’d lost and reconcile that with what he believed a person could lose and still be okay. After a few seconds, he figured he was in

the red. And the shape of the wound, too, that was something else that unsettled him. The gash had widened in diameter, and so had the dull, red throb surrounding it. His palm had started to ache, some, but he thought maybe he was just imagining it. Just like back in the basement—he knew that there was nothing really down there with him, nothing malevolent. He knew that he was getting his hand under control, that everything would be okay. And he knew that all he really needed was to get off that God-forsaken continent.

But then John felt tired, suddenly, like his energy had been drained out of him and mottled with the blood and clay at his feet. He didn't think he'd lost *that* much blood.

And he was extremely thirsty, even though he'd taken a handful of gulps from their water bottle just an hour ago. The same one that was probably making its way back across Lake Togo at that very instant, upended by the skinny baggage loader and *moto* pilot in the green Nigerian soccer shirt. He could taste the water as they shared it in the boat, feel it soothing his suddenly parched throat, and hated them for it. He thought it may even be worth it to be back in that boat, heading the wrong way across the lake so he could steal a gulp from that bottle.

John looked back up at Stan. "I'll be okay but I could use a drink."

Stan snorted. "You're not kidding, buddy. Brussels Air has a scotch and soda with my name on it."

"No, I mean—well yeah, that too, but can I borrow your water?"

Stan shook his head. "It's in the cooler, remember?"

Jean hung up on his Blackberry and rummaged through his canvas knapsack. He pulled out a water bottle with a white label reading “l’eau épurée” in blue block letters and held it in front of John’s face. “Mon ami,” he said. “Take.”

John glanced over at Lauren and Myra, who were shaking their heads. “No, Jean, I don’t want to take your water from you.”

“Is fine, I have plenty.” He shook the bottle to show John how much he had. “Yes?”

John held up both of his hands. The cloth bandage around his right palm was a dark red, but no blood had seeped through. “No, no, really, I’m fine. You said the van will be here soon, so I can just wait.”

Jean shook his head and smiled wide. “No, water is good,” he said, pointing to his bottle. He unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. “See?” he said, thrusting the bottle in John’s face again.

John looked at Stan to his left and Lauren and Myra to his right, who were all staring intently and shaking their heads wider than before. He gripped the bottle and slid it from Jean’s grasp, stared down into its open mouth and God knows what else floating around in its contents.

His mind raced back to the doctor at the Dallas International Travel Clinic who’d given him and Lauren the *what to avoid* talk before the trip: petting stray dogs, ingesting local water in any way, engaging in intimate contact with natives. John had also followed the doctor’s advice and foregone the Hep B shot because he wasn’t planning on getting any tribal tattoos or fucking any West African women on the trip. Not that their

accommodations had invited any domestic fucking, either—Lauren hated overheated sex, John sticking to her and the sheets and combining everything into a suffocating cocoon. John liked that sex, the animal feeling it gave him, and he sometimes doubled his efforts during the act to cook up a sweat knowing that she'd abide since they were already at it, that deep down she probably liked it as he did.

But deep down, she still didn't, and John had harbored no hopes of her responding to his advances after their first sweaty, restless night under the slow ceiling fan in Abidjan. He'd missed it after two days but had resigned himself to wait, and wait, that he could count down the nights on one hand soon. After seven days she'd missed it, too, missed that connection, that moment afterward with both of them spent, John lying on top of her huffing rhythmically, feeling his racing heartbeat dwindle back down to a steady thud against her right breast until he kissed each of her eyes, right then left, then the crest of her light mound as he slipped away from the bed to dress.

They were both ready to get off that God-forsaken continent and into their ceramic-tiled shower for a couple of hours.

John cursed himself for not enduring the extra pain of a fifth shot and another hundred dollars. Did this count as intimate contact? He felt like Jean took care of himself, but how could he know? He raised the water bottle at Jean, like a toast.

“Mon ami,” he said, trying to smile, raising the bottle to his lips.

A clown car horn beeped loudly. John lowered the water bottle and looked down the dirt road.

The van. Jo-Jo was waving his left arm outside the window, laying on the horn and laughing. He slid to a stop in front of their group, their luggage sliding along the roof into the front of the net just the same.

John stood and pushed the water bottle into Jean's chest and made for the back of the van. He lifted the rear hatch and unsnapped the small red cooler resting on the floor. The only water he could find amidst the ice, other than Stan and Myra's lone bottle, was contained in little plastic bags. He'd encountered these water bags throughout the trip. At first they were a curiosity, and sucking water from a bag through a hole he'd torn with his teeth had felt foreign but necessary, all part of the experience. After a few days he'd gotten used to the practice, catching the bag and tearing a corner and squirting its contents into his mouth in seemingly one motion. After a few more days they'd repulsed him—the bags absorbed the smell and flavor of whatever container they'd sat in, usually a stale refrigerator filled with pungent food or an old barrel-shaped cooler branded by Coca-Cola and full of rust-colored water and small chunks of ice. If John closed his eyes he could swear he was drinking liquified aluminum.

Dumping the water from the bags into a water bottle had made it a tad more palatable, but not by much, so by the end of the trip John had resorted to shotgunning the water the way he used to beer at parties in college.

So, he dug through the ice looking for anything other than water bags but only coming up with red Coke cans, which were ubiquitous throughout West Africa—Pepsi and Dr. Pepper apparently deemed the other side of the world not worth the fight.

“There's just bags, here,” John said.

“So?” Stan said. “It’s water.”

“Yeah, but—

“But what?”

“Here, baby,” Lauren said, holding a bag out to him.

“Nah, you take it.”

“But you need it. Who cares?”

“It’s just...” John snatched a coke from the cooler. He hadn’t had a leaded coke in God knows how long, sticking to Crown and Diet when he felt like a mixed drink, Coke Zero when he felt like having a soda but didn’t want to pay for it. Except he had to say “coke” for everything, now—the word *soda* didn’t exist in Texas.

He wiped the top of the can with his bloody shirt, still holding to the superstition of the woman who died from meningitis or something contracted from the lip of a soda can. He popped the can and drained half of it.

Any drink, leaded or unleaded, had never tasted so good, so sweet. It was more filling than John remembered—he used to down them like unbagged water when he was a kid, when diet soda was only for girls who cared about their figures. Back in the States he was the target market, now—men quietly watching their figure—but as of that moment all he cared about was finding the bottom of that can and then finding the bottom of the next one in the cooler.

John had a third of the second can down when it all came back up. He jerked his head toward the ground the way kids do when they drink a Coke too fast and it feels like it’s shooting up their nose. The brown soda gushing from his mouth and spraying over his

left hand holding the can swallowed the sound of his gag. It didn't taste quite as good the second time around.

He went back to the last time something like this happened, freshman year at BC. Late in the fall, he and his dorm roommate had paid a homeless guy ten bucks to buy them a handle of Imperial vodka, which was actually worth less than what they paid their courier. The homeless guy met them around the corner on the side of the liquor store and shuttled the paper bag into John's hands.

"Where's yours?" John had asked.

The man nodded at the bag and shook his head, wrinkling his nose. Then he walked back to the front of the store and unfolded his "Who am I kidding, I need booze" cardboard sign from inside his grey woolen overcoat. John stuffed the paper bag and its bottle into his backpack, then he and his roommate crossed the street to the convenience store and purchased a couple armfuls of twenty-ounce Minute Maid orange juices.

In their dormroom that night, the two freshmen watched two of the most important films of the eighties, *Rocky IV* and *First Blood: Part II*, in between sipping their three-parts-OJ-two-parts-Imperial concoctions. Of course, being eighteen years old the boys' three parts to two parts measurements consisted of twelve ounces to eight ounces, and "sipping" meant "gulping down as fast as you can while scrunching your face." You can barely taste good vodka—after a couple of swallows of Imperial orange juice, John smelled like a stumbling extra in *Dr. Zhivago*.

As the night wore on, they'd changed course and began taking pulls from the bottle and chasing them with slugs of OJ, however much it took to get the vodka down. The next morning, keeping it down had been the problem.

John had crashed out at two in the morning but woke up with his 8:50 alarm for his 9:00 Art Appreciation class with Dr. Petrovsky, whose lazy eye enabled him to keep one eye on his slides of Cezanne and Rodin and one on his nodding students in the lecture hall. John's head wasn't pounding yet—he hadn't slept off enough of the Imperial for that to be the case. He did feel a ghastly rumble in his stomach while slinking into some clothes, though. He sat on the edge of his bed and looked at the floor, wobbling, waiting for his mouth to fill with water. He breathed heavily and waited, staring at the empty plastic vodka bottle resting on top of the overflowing trashcan. He hunched over, sure he could feel something welling up inside.

Nothing.

John exhaled and slipped a toboggan over his head, grabbed his backpack on his way out. He belched into the open doorway, and the Imperial reek made him remember he hadn't brushed his teeth and there were some girls in Art Appreciation he may not want to gross out—once you're *that guy*, there's no going back.

So he'd squirted a gob of toothpaste onto his brush and turned on the water, shoving the toothbrush into his mouth and then looking up into the mirror just as the torrent rushed out of him, thrusting his face sinkward. The vomit exploded out of John in a fury, erupting from a deep corner he didn't know existed. He emptied himself into the

filling sink and onto the toothbrush he still held in his right hand, helplessly watching it happen in the mirror. It just kept coming.

His roommate looked over at what was happening and covered his face with his pillow.

When it was over John had spat into the brimming sink, its drain clogged by some ungodly chunks of filth he'd clean up a few hours later. At that moment, though, he was late for class, so he'd stuffed his tainted toothbrush into the trashcan, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and headed out the door.

John thought of that homeless guy while the puke rushed over his hand and the coke can and into the clay, remembered him squinching his face behind the liquor store at the lesson he'd already learned but had let John learn for himself: you only drink dirt-cheap vodka once.

“Baby? Oh my God, are you okay?”

John kept puking like that day in front of the sink, not stopping until everything from everywhere was out of him. He didn't look up this time, though, just stared into the mess pooling into the clay. *Just let it all out*, he thought. *You'll feel better afterward.*

That's how it always works, you just need to get rid of it.

But what was *it*?

John spat the last out. Flies were already buzzing around the chunky heap on the ground. Some of it had splashed onto the edge of his sandals, but he didn't really mind—they already smelled funky before the Great Evacuation, so he wasn't planning on

bringing them back to the States, anyway. “I’m okay,” he said, spitting again. He heaved a few breaths, his chest shaking visibly.

“Are you joking?” Lauren said. “That wasn’t okay, John.”

“I think I just drank too much too fast.” John wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I think I’m okay, really.”

Stan walked to the back of the van and put a hand on John’s shoulder. “He’ll be alright. I think he got it all out.”

“How can you say that, Dad? I’ve never seen that much come out of someone.”

“Like I said, I think he got it all out.” Stan laughed.

Lauren shook her head. “Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” John said, standing upright. “Let’s just get to the airport and get the fuck out of here.”

Jean whispered something to Jo-Jo, who was leaning outside of the driver’s window. He turned back to his charges clustered behind the van and smiled. “Everything okay now. Joneses get in bus, airport not far from here.” He walked to the passenger side of the yellow VW and slid open the door, gesturing inside.

The group filed into the van. Jean held his hand up in front of John before he could climb in.

“What?” John asked.

Jean leaned over to his right ear, away from the van. “We go somewhere first, mon ami. Will be of aid. *D’accord?*”

John nodded. “Oui.” Jean smiled and hopped into the front seat.

Lauren turned and faced John on the middle bench seat and slipped off his cap, brushing his hair back and holding a hand to his forehead.

“You think you’ll be okay to make it to the airport?” she said.

“What choice do I have?”

“I mean, should we have brought a bucket?”

John smiled weakly. “I’ll be okay. It’s a good thing the windows on this POS are always open, just in case.”

The van pulled away from the slave house’s compound and into the dirt road, jostling from side to side. John put a hand to his stomach, but didn’t feel anything trying to come back up. Lauren glanced at him, and he shook his head. The van settled onto the road and they made their way through the village and toward the main road to Lomé.

John stared out at the villagers stopping to watch them go. The half-naked children smiled and waved, calling out in French or Ewe, so everyone in the rear of the van waved back. The older natives just stared, the men in their dashikis remaining at their tables, the women in their long, bright-colored dresses holding their baskets above their heads in the street.

“Was my head warm when you felt it?” John asked, not turning away from the window.

“You think you have a fever?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

Lauren kept smiling and waving at the children outside in the street. “Not at all, actually. To tell the truth, you felt kind of cold.”

* * *

The main road up the coast to Lomé was just plain batshit. The two-lane highway, if it could be called as much, was surrounded by heavy brush and scattered palms on both sides, with the South side—or left side, for the party aboard the hurtling VW bus—receding into the ocean about a half-mile away. The drive would’ve been absolutely beautiful if it weren’t for the *drive*—motorists divided the two paved lanes into four, with the narrow dirt shoulder just wide enough for the flow of motos to pass while comprising a third “lane” of traffic. Vicious looking potholes lurked throughout, though most weren’t wide enough to necessitate anything more than a slight swerve. Most.

John was trying to focus on the shirts flapping on the backs of the moto drivers passing them on the right. He sucked on the corner of a tepid water bag Stan had passed him from the cooler. It tasted like filings, the metal end of the thermometer his mom would stick under his tongue when he was sick. The temperature of the water he squeezed into his mouth and the heat baking off the pavement didn’t bother John, though—he was shivering. In fact, he’d stopped sweating for the first time since stepping off the plane back in Abidjan.

Jo-Jo downshifted behind a suddenly stopped Mazda and lurched into the first “passing lane” on the right. He spat something in Ewe out his window at the driver.

“Jesus!” Myra yelled, holding her hand against her USA visor as if she expected it to blow off. Riding in boats along the breezy West African coast and zooming across dirt roads on the backs of motos had made the act a reflex.

John had hoped from day one of the trip that she'd lose that denim tourist sign. His dream had almost come true on their boat ride across Lake Togo into Togoville. Their drive from Lomé to the coast had taken much longer than expected thanks to a pack of goats wandering on the road, so they didn't get into the boat and onto the water until dusk. The winds had picked up as the sky darkened, swirling along the surface of the lake as Jo-Jo poled them foot-by-foot to the village across the water. Myra was sharing a bench with Jean so he could tell her the salient facts about the last stop of their trip—mainly that they constructed the concrete boat landing and “T O G O V I L L E”-engraved wall in honor of “Poop” John Paul II's 1985 visit, which was undoubtedly the biggest event in the village's three-hundred-year history.

After hearing Jean tell of the Poop's visit, John leaned over and asked Myra if she wanted a picture with their guide before it was too dark to capture their view of the lake.

“What a great idea,” she'd said. She and Jean turned to face the camera and leaned close to each other.

“Say cheese,” John said.

Jean blinked, confused.

“Okay, *smile*.” John took the picture. The flash made both Jean and Myra blink repeatedly.

“Ooh, get one with mine!” Myra said. She turned back toward the front of the boat where Jo-Jo had piled their bags. While she hunched over and unzipped the front pocket of her luggage, a gust ripped through the boat. It snagged the bill of her visor and flung it through the air just before she reached up to hold it against her head. It sailed

over John and Lauren's heads—who'd both ducked away from the wind to avoid losing their own hats—and headed for the water.

But right as John turned to watch it fly out to sea, Stan reached up from his perch in the back of the boat and snatched it overhead. He was still wearing those heinous shades.

"Way to go, Mister Jones!" Jean yelled.

"I told you you got to watch this thing, Hun," Stan said, passing it up to John. "If you lose it people won't know where we're from."

John frowned. "I doubt that," he muttered.

"Is good hat," Jean agreed.

"Visor," Myra'd said, taking it back from John. "You call it a visor."

"Ah-ha, yes, vie sir."

"Very bonne." Myra snugged it back on top of her head. She put her arm around Jean and turned him toward the rear of the boat, posing. "Okay, let's try this again."

"I think it's too dark now," John had said.

Now he wished he could donate the damn vie-sir to an unsuspecting moto driver blazing past. He knew from experience on this trip that it would be accepted without question, and most likely worn immediately. Indulging his impulse to free Myra's hair poof from that lesbo-lid couldn't be seen as rude, then, but charitable—generously providing another person's face a respite from the brutal African sun would be an act that calls for commendation. But John just turned back to the window. He felt a low rumble in his stomach.

“What the hell?” Stan said. “Watch out for our luggage on top.”

“*Dad.*”

“So sorry, Joneses,” Jean said. “We just trying to get to airport fastest way.”

“Well, I’d rather get there in one piece. Remember that my son-in-law puked his guts up just twenty minutes ago?”

“Quoi?”

“I’m fine,” John said, still staring out the window.

“He’s *fine*, Dad,” Lauren said, turning around.

“Your father just wants us to be safe,” Myra said.

“The roads have all been like this. What did you expect?”

“I’m fine,” John said again. To his left he could see Jean watching him.

“Look, just because they don’t know how to drive over here doesn’t mean I have to be okay with it,” Stan said.

Lauren gestured to the cars in front of them. “Everyone’s driving this way—we’re just in the flow of traffic.”

“So—

“Do you see any wrecks? No, you don’t.”

“No wrecks, is good,” Jean said, smiling, looking at John. “Everyone is okay.”

“You don’t have to be rude about it, Lauren,” Myra said. “Your dad just—

“I *know*. We’re fine, okay?”

“I’m fine,” John said again, still staring out his window. Jean nodded.

“See?” Lauren said, turning back around.

Myra looked over at Stan, who shrugged.

Jean faced the road and muttered something in Ewe. Jo-Jo nodded. They stayed in the “passing lane,” joining the swifter flow of vehicles toward the capital, motos buzzing by on their right now and then.

Lauren placed a hand on John’s forehead and watched him with a wan smile. She licked her lips. “He’s fine.”

* * *

The road widened as they entered Lomé, nearly providing enough lanes for the flow of traffic entering the city. Motos were everywhere, outnumbering all other vehicles at least five to one. The dense brush and eucalyptus trees on the side of the road gave way to a towering Shell refinery and then to squat blocks of concrete painted orange or blue or yellow. People wearing bright dashikis stood in doorways and sat in chairs outside of shops. Some laid on the ground, apparently asleep. Younger Africans walking along the narrow sidewalks or riding on motos wore modern clothes—jeans, leather jackets, occasionally a suit.

While they idled in traffic, John watched a tan-skinned girl with pink hair and a denim jacket hold onto her boyfriend on the back of a moto. She looked back at him without expression, blowing smoke from a drag she’d just taken from the cigarette dangling in her left hand. She had a stud in her right nostril. John thought she was beautiful, but she made him feel cold. He shifted in his seat and looked away.

The black and green graffiti that embellished the cinder block structures clumped along the sidestreets eclipsed the dull grey of the cement wall dividing the main road. The

writing was in French or Ewe, John couldn't tell which. Maybe both. He tried to piece the writings into something that made sense as they inched by.

"Mon ami, what does that say?"

"Quoi?" Jean asked, turning his head.

"Les...écrités." John couldn't think of the word for *writing*. "Dans le..." He couldn't think of the word for *wall*, either. "Je ne sais pas."

"Quoi?"

John exhaled and pointed at the divider.

"Ah-ha, yes." Jean pointed. "*Graffiti*." He said the word slowly, nodding.

John laughed. "Of course it is."

Jean shrugged.

"What does it say?" Lauren asked.

"Okay, yes." Jean studied the wall. "It no really matter."

"What does it say?" John asked.

"Yeah, *mon ami*," Stan said. "What does it say?" Myra nudged him.

Jean stared at the wall for a few seconds. "It say about gangs. Yovos should watch their steps."

"*What?*" Myra yelled.

Jean and Jo-Jo started laughing and shouting in Ewe. John looked over at Lauren, raising his eyebrows.

"Joking," Jean said, composing himself. "Jean is joking. It no say that. Joneses safe."

“Then what *does* it say?” Stan said, leaning over the bench.

Jean turned his head. “Just gang messages is all. Just talk.”

“I thought you said this city was a lot safer than Lagos.”

“Lomé *safer*, is true.” He turned back to the road. “Not safe, but *safer*, oui?”

“But—

“Is *fine*.” Jean said, looking out his window. “You safe. You leaving.”

“No to worry,” Jo-Jo said, watching his passengers in the rearview. Stan leaned back into his seat. Traffic had sped up a bit and they were coming up on a large roundabout. A group of fifty-plus motos waited in the circle. John could see the airport’s two air traffic towers looming in the distance on the left.

“We’re getting close,” he said.

“Oui,” Jean said in the front seat. Jo-Jo maneuvered the van into the right lane and began making a right turn.

“Where are you going?” Stan yelled, pointing. “The airport’s over there.”

“We get there, we get there,” Jean said.

“No to worry,” Jo-Jo said.

Lauren grabbed John’s hand. “What’s happening?”

John slid into the middle of their bench so he could face Jean. “Where are we going? I don’t want to go to that place you were talking about earlier.”

Lauren shook John’s shoulder. “What *place*? What are you talking about?”

Stan leaned over. “Son, what the hell’s going on?”

“Turn back,” John said. “We just want to go to the airport.”

Lauren shook him again. “*Babe?*”

“Look,” John began, “I don’t care—

Jean nodded at John’s right hand. It was bleeding again.

“Oh, shit,” John said, holding up his hand. “Oh shit oh shit oh shit.” He’d left a bloody smear on Jean’s armrest. Jean tipped the armrest up with his right hand, moving his left shoulder out of its way.

“What’s going on?” Myra yelled.

Lauren grabbed John’s left sleeve. “*Babe?*”

John lunged to his window. He held his right hand outside while squeezing his wrist with his left hand. They’d stopped again, and the moto bearing the tan-skinned girl with pink hair was back alongside them. She looked over at John hanging out of the van and blew smoke from the side of her mouth.

John stared into her dark, vacant eyes. Dark rust-colored blood dripped down his palm and onto the pavement. He felt frozen there, staring at the girl and her staring right back at him, a moment that lasted a few seconds but seemed to last an hour. He lost focus on everything else surrounding him, even the slow pulse of pain in his right hand.

Then John truly did lose focus—the world slipped into a haze and he vomited onto the girl’s left side.

Chapter Three

John woke in darkness. He slid his black sweatshirt down his face, the one that Lauren had packed for him in case he got cold on one of their seven hundred flights. He smiled at the thought of this, that he might need a sweatshirt in this sweltering asshole God fashioned for the Earth.

But he began shivering, and his smile turned into a grimace. John smacked his lips to try and fight off his cottonmouth. His throat felt like he'd swallowed a shovel of stale ash. He squinted his eyes in the daylight, which seemed to be pounding against his head like he'd had a few belts of Imperial before tuckering out. Whenever that had been.

“What happened?” he asked. “Why aren't we at the airport?”

“You puked all over that pink-haired native and then fell down crying in the seat,” Stan said.

“*Stanley*,” Myra said.

“What? That's what happened.”

Lauren glared back at her father. “Baby, you got sick again and then you laid down in the seat. You said you were freezing. But we want to know where we are right now.”

“How should I know? Can I get some water?”

Stan leaned over the seat. “You told Jean you didn't want to go to some place, earlier. Right before you, well—” He looked over at Myra, who was still holding that visor in place, and sat back.

“What were you talking about, John?” Lauren asked. She pulled his left hand away from fiddling with the bandage on his palm. “What place?”

John squeezed his eyes tighter, slid the bill of his cap down over his face. “He told me we’d go someplace that would be ‘of aid.’” John made air quotes around the last two words. “He said we’d go there before the airport.”

“Did he say what kind of place it is?”

“No.”

“Did he say why he wanted to take you there?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Stan leaned over again and flipped up the bill of John’s cap. “Because both of ‘em are already inside.”

John opened his eyes and saw the cab of the van was empty. He sat up on his elbows and twisted around to look out his window. They were sitting in the tiny parking lot of a restaurant somewhere in Lomé. At least, John believed it was a restaurant—the single-story white cinder block building had posters of roasted chicken and broiled fish plastered in its dark windows. The place had a flat black roof and red tiled letters that spelled “Vaudou de Poulet.” John remembered from college that *poulet* was chicken. He wheezed a small laugh at that, recalling how he’d committed that seemingly worthless fact to memory by repeating lines from Will Ferrell’s Robert Goulet sketch on “Saturday Night Live.” He didn’t know what the other word meant.

“What’s so funny?” Stan asked.

“Nothing.” John turned around. “It’s just a restaurant. Can I get some water now, please?” he croaked. “I’m dying here.”

Stan handed John his water bottle and he took a long gulp, draining half of what was left. He held it up to Stan.

“You keep it,” Stan said.

Lauren ran her hands through her blond hair, which was matted from her cap. “But that doesn’t make sense—why would he take us to a restaurant?”

“I have no idea, Lauren. Maybe because we have a long trip ahead of us.”

Myra leaned over next to Stan. “We can eat at the airport after we get through security.” John remembered how Myra just couldn’t *believe* how long and hot their wait had been in the airplane hangar that served as the Customs office in Abidjan.

“We’re not going to miss our flight, Myra,” Stan said.

“How do you know? It’s only three hours away and we can’t even see the air traffic towers from here.”

“Were those people pissed?” John asked. “The ones from the road?”

“No, getting vomited on is sign of respect to these people,” Stan said. Myra elbowed Stan in the ribs. He took off those obnoxious wraparound shades and rubbed his eyes. Despite the persistent thrum in his right hand, John again relished the white raccoon mask Stan’s reddened face had acquired during the trip.

“The pink-haired girl and her boyfriend chased us for a while, but we lost them when Joe took some side streets.”

“Jo-Jo,” John said.

Stan held out his hands.

“So what did they say when we got here?” John said.

“They didn’t say anything,” Lauren said. “They just walked in.”

John looked back around to what he thought was a restaurant. He’d left a quarter-sized smudge of blood on the glass a minute ago that now blotted out the “O” in *Poulet*. He looked down at the khaki strips wrapped around his wound, traced the outline of the dark red circle in the center with his pointer finger. The bleeding seemed to have stopped or at least slowed to a trickle—the bandage was moist but nothing was dripping out. But John was still unsettled by the wound, not that it couldn’t hold its clot but that its throbbing was overtaking his right wrist, as well, was worming its way through the meat of his hand and inching into his forearm. He stopped circling the wound and placed his finger at its center, began to press its tip into the small cavity behind the bandage that now seemed to open into the innerworkings of his right arm, it felt like he could just slip inside himself here and—

“*John*,” Lauren said.

John pulled his hand away from his wound and turned around. “What?”

She held her hand against his forehead again. “You checked out there for a second.”

“I’m fine.” John wiped his forehead onto his sleeve. “So they just went inside without saying a word?”

“Yeah,” Lauren said, looking over his shoulder. “If that second word is ‘chicken,’ what does the first word mean?”

“Wait, ‘day’ means ‘chicken’ here?” Stan said.

“What?”

“*De*,” John said.

“*Duh?*” Stan said.

“Oui.” John grimaced—his stomach rumbled, and he didn’t feel like puking out the window of a Volkswagen bus again. “Hey, why are the windows shut?”

“Why do you think?” Stan said. “Look at where we are.”

“But we don’t know where we are.”

“More reason to keep things shut tight.” Stan had put his shades back on, but John could feel him glaring at him. “Anyway, you’re supposed to know where we are.”

John looked back at the restaurant for the third time and sounded out the first word under his breath. *Vow-dough? Veaux-du?* He tried to access the French dictionary in his memory banks but it only contained so many terms, much fewer than he believed were in there.

“I think the first word is ‘Village,’” he said.

“Village?” Lauren asked. “So it’s called Chicken Village?”

“Yeah, you know, ‘Chicken Village.’ Like ‘Burger Town’ or ‘Pizza Hut.’ It’s just a stupid name for a restaurant.”

“I guess.”

Lauren slid her hands down her face. “So why would it be so important for them to take us to a place called *Chicken Village*? Do we look really hungry?”

“I don’t know.”

“I am,” Stan said.

Lauren ignored him. “How could this place be ‘of aid,’ like he said to you? You’re sick and our flight leaves in three hours.”

“Two hours and fifty-five minutes,” Myra said, holding a hand to her visor.

Lauren gestured to her mom with her left hand. “Two hours and fifty-five minutes. So why—

“I don’t know, Lauren.” A sharp pain lit into John’s skull, and he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. “I don’t know what the hell he was talking about. I don’t know why he wanted to bring me here. I certainly didn’t *ask* him to. But there’s pictures of food in the windows so I think we can assume that this place is a restaurant. That or it’s a front for a black-market organ harvesting business and they want to knock me out and cut out one of my kidneys.”

“Don’t even joke about—

“I *know*. You’re right, I don’t know why we’re here or what kind of place this is, okay?”

The four of them sat listening to the sputtering hum of motos speeding through the capital for a moment.

“Well,” Stan said, “Whatever kind of place it is, we’re there now. So let’s go inside and figure out what’s so damn important so we can finally get the hell out of here.”

John reached around Lauren and tried to slide open the van door but it just clicked. Stan pulled up the lock and John slung the door all the way back with a hollow

thud. He brushed past Lauren and into the parking lot, its blacktop giving considerably under his sandals in the heat.

Lauren started to follow him out when Stan grabbed her arm. She looked down at him and he shook his head.

“You can’t go in there,” Stan said.

“I’m going.”

“No you’re not. You heard what your husband said—no one knows what kind of place this is.”

John leaned into the van, his arms stretched across the doorway like a crucifix. He started to reply—a real zinger, too, like “Talk about *Chicken Village*”—but he doubled over inside the van coughing into his left fist. It was a nasty whooping fit that sent his back into violent spasms. Lauren patted him on the back, tried to hold him still.

“*Babe!* Oh my God.”

John waited for a few moments until he stopped heaving, then stood up outside the van. “I’m fine,” he said, exhaling, nodding at Lauren. “Let’s go.”

“My daughter’s not going in there. Think about it, John.”

John looked back at the restaurant and the food posters in its windows, its red wooden door with a gold knob, and shivered a little—aches had crawled back into his limbs, and his armhairs were standing up in spite of the heat. He didn’t like this place, but he didn’t know why. He turned around and leaned into the van, touching Lauren’s shoulder.

“He’s right. You should stay here.” He took a gulp of the water and tossed the bottle into the van.

“But you can’t go in there by yourself,” Lauren said. “Something’s wrong with you, and whatever it is is getting worse.”

Myra grabbed Stan’s left arm. “You can’t leave us alone out here.”

Stan held her hand. “I won’t, sweetheart, I won’t.” He looked up at John. “See, someone needs to stay here and guard our women. So that just leaves you.”

“Oh, I like this idea,” Lauren said.

“It’s going to be fine.” John bent down and kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, I won’t eat anything weird before our flight.”

“Because that’s *exactly* what I’m worried about.”

“I’ll be okay,” he said, grabbing his black sweatshirt. “In and out.”

“What do you need that for?”

“You never know, it might be cold in there.”

Lauren made a crooked smile and looked back at Myra. “*Now* he wants it.”

“Be smart in there,” Stan said.

“And be quick, too,” Myra said, leaning over the bench seat. “Don’t forget our flight now’s only two hours and fifty three—

John slammed the door shut before she could finish. When he lifted his hand he noticed the red smear on the door handle. He glanced down at his left hand while crossing the parking lot, subtle so Lauren wouldn’t have something else to worry about.

Blood.

John paused for a moment but didn't turn around, just wiped his hand on his shorts as he approached the red door. Blood? Were his lungs bleeding? But that couldn't be it—John bet that he'd just torn up his esophagus from throwing up so much. He'd read that on WebMD.

* * *

The wooden door was heavy—John guessed incorrectly that it was made of oak—and concealed a warm, shaded room with six or seven tables. A fried food haze crawled along the ceiling. As soon as he'd shut the door John slipped into the hoodie, zipped it up to his neck.

Jean waved from their table in the back-right corner, as if John wouldn't notice Jo-Jo's massive back and shoulders jutting out from his chair or that they were the only two people dining in the restaurant.

"Mon ami," Jean said. "Come." He stood and pulled a chair from their table. It was a thick wooden chair that in the dim light looked to be mahogany. It had a dark brown rattan seat. There were gnarled, one-inch skulls carved into the knobs at the top.

"I think I'll just stand," John said.

Jean shrugged and sat back down.

John stood behind the chair, running his thumbs over the skulls. "So, what kind of place is this?"

Jean held his hands out to the platters in front of them and looked left-right then back up at John. "Is restaurant."

Jo-Jo laughed and grabbed another chicken wing from the greasy platter in the center. There were three white, stained plates containing fried plantain chips, fried potatoes, and wings, though John knew from the previous week that those were most likely thighs chopped in quarters to look like wings, that a few of the pieces were ninety-percent bone. Stan had called those “lucky wings.” John’s stomach rumbled again and he looked away from the food.

“We need to get to the airport, we don’t want to stop at a restaurant.”

“Joneses should eat,” Jean said. “Long travels ahead.”

“Oui,” Jo-Jo said around his food.

“I don’t think I’m hungry.”

Jean looked up from his plate and nodded. “Oui. Is first exam.” He slid John’s chair back under the table and resumed eating.

“Exam?”

Jean didn’t respond.

John threw up his hands. “What’s the name of this place, anyway?”

“Vaudou de Poulet.”

“Yeah, but what does it mean?”

“Chicken Voodoo.”

“*Chicken Voodoo?*”

“Oui,” the two men said in unison.

John laughed aloud.

“Quoi?” Jean said.

“Let me get this straight,” John said. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. “You freak everybody out by not taking us to the airport or telling us where we’re going for *this*?”

The two men stopped eating but didn’t say anything.

“You’re telling me we might not make our flight because you had a craving for some fucking Togo KFC?”

A large, light-skinned woman wearing a red scarf on her head peeked over the counter near the front of the restaurant. The same posters of cooked chicken and fish were displayed above the counter. Jean stood and called out to the woman in Ewe, who glanced at John once more before returning to the kitchen.

Jean gestured to the table. “Sit, mon ami. We finish.”

“I’m not sitting down. We need to get back in the van and go to the airport.”

“Is not time.” Jean sat back down and resumed eating. Jo-Jo had left one “wing” next to the stack of greasy bones on one of the plates.

“Let’s go,” John said, placing his hands on his hips.

The two West Africans didn’t respond.

“*Now*.” John waited for a response again but didn’t get one. He looked around the restaurant. The counter to his right was a thin piece of dark wood jutting out from the wall—John figured the woman had just leaned out from the kitchen because if she’d rested on the counter it would’ve snapped off. Next to the food posters a chalkboard listed the day’s offerings in French. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling were off, so the

only lighting came from the sun filtering around the posters in the windows and through two frosted-glass skylights.

A hand latched onto John's left arm and he wheeled around.

"Mon ami." Jean stood close to him. "Sit. Please." Jo-Jo skidded the chair out with his left foot, which John noticed had been bare this whole time, the skin underneath as white as his own.

John sat.

"You no hungry, but should eat before second exam."

"What are you talking about? What exam? What was the first one?"

"Is of aid."

John looked away from the food. "How would any kind of exam I could get here be 'of aid' to me? And what makes you think I would need aid, anyway?"

"Sang malade."

"Quoi?" John said.

Jean wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his Messi jersey. "Vous savez." He exhaled. "Vous savez."

Sang malade? "Yeah, I'm feeling like shit, but that's just because of the trip. The only kind of exam I want is from a doctor back home." John gestured at their surroundings. "Or at least, not here. This isn't what you'd call a sterile environment."

Jo-Jo popped the last plaintain into his mouth and stared at John, chewing a mouthful of food. John realized that neither of them probably cared much about sterile environments.

“Look, I don’t know what the hell your problem is or why this isn’t getting through to you. I’m *fine*. The only thing that’s going to help me is making our fl—

Yellow-green vomit exploded from John’s mouth, making *flight* come out as *flughhhh*. It filled one of the platters, cascaded from the table to the floor. The two other men shot backwards from the table, knocking their chairs over. One of the skulls on Jo-Jo’s chair chipped a tooth.

John got it all out in two heaves and leaned back, inched his chair away from the mess with his feet. His right shoe slipped in the muck on the concrete floor. The platter of discarded chicken bones covered in bile looked like a malicious vagabond stew. The woman in the red scarf peeked out from behind the counter and then disappeared into the kitchen. John’s eyes were wide, bewildered. He couldn’t stop staring at the mess on the table.

The woman materialized next to their table with a handful of yellow rags and a bucket of water.

“Non,” Jean said, waving his hands in the air. He began hissing at her in Ewe, but John thought he heard him address her as Fielle.

“Fielle,” John echoed, staring straight ahead. The woman looked at John and then glanced back up at his guide. Jean shook his head. She picked up the bucket and scurried back to the kitchen, water sloshing over its sides.

The two men lifted John out of the chair by his armpits.

“We wait too long for other exam,” Jean murmured in John’s ear, in the tone of voice John’s mother had used when telling him to go to bed for the third time. “Is time.”

“Fielle,” John said.

They each placed a hand on one of his shoulders and escorted him toward a doorway in the back-left corner of the restaurant.

“See? Mon ami needs aid,” Jean said. “Jean will aid.”

A beaded curtain hung in the doorway, strings of wooden beads shaped like crescent moons and stars.

“Really, I’m fine,” John said. He’d snapped out of his daze and tried to stop walking toward the doorway, but his feet just skidded along the floor. He was going to find out what was behind that curtain whether he wanted to or not.

* * *

John sat across from a man behind a large wooden desk wearing a black pinstriped suit. He was eating a plate of chicken things and what looked to be coleslaw, though it was purple. His chair was an exact replica of the ones in the restaurant’s dining room, only thicker and larger—the skulls laughing on top were as big as Jo-Jo’s fist. He didn’t acknowledge John at all, just licked his fingers.

The room had no windows or ventilation of any kind, and felt like a sauna. John felt overwhelmed by the heat but with an aching chill at the same time, that miserable in-between conjured by fever dreams.

Jean and Jo-Jo stood off to the side. “This is Chaman,” Jean said. The man didn’t look up.

“That’s great,” John said, shivering. “What does he have to do with me?”

“Is Chaman. Of aid.”

“But I don’t need any ‘of aid,’” John said, standing up. “I’m fine, I swear. I must’ve just drank some local water somehow.”

Jean held out his hand and made a stern face. John sat back down. He noticed that the left leg of Jean’s shorts wasn’t as long as the other one, and looked down at his bandaged palm. He traced the wound with his index finger.

“The only *aid* I need is a ride to the airport. We’ll be lucky if we make our flight at all, now.”

“Exam first, mon ami. Is fine. Much time.”

“You want us to get stuck in Togo?”

Jean shook his head. “Non.”

“Non,” Jo-Jo echoed, arms crossed.

“I hear you no agree with food at Chicken Voodoo,” the man in the suit said, chuckling around his chicken.

John looked over at the two guides. “Tell me this guy’s going to drive us now, or something. Tell me that’s why you brought me here.”

Jean shook his head. “No, mon ami. He is—

“Of aid, I get it. Look, I told you I don’t care who he is or whatever kind of exam he wants to do.” John looked at the man in the suit. “Colonel Sanders here isn’t laying a fucking finger on me. All I want to do is get on that plane.”

Jean held his hands behind his back and bit his lip, shook his head. This wasn’t working, and time was running short. God only knew how often Myra was shouting out

their remaining time in the backseat of the van like some screeching denim-visored Mission Control.

“Mon ami,” John said, standing, “we need you to get us to the airport. You’ve gotten us this far, and you’re the only person we trust to take us to the end.” He gestured to the man behind the desk. “Not anyone else,” he continued, shaking his head, “just Jo-Jo. And you. S’il vous plaît, mon ami.”

Jean looked puzzled. “Mais, mais, this is Chaman,” he said, pointing to the man in the suit. “You want to see him before going.”

John knew he needed to play along now to speed things up, or they might never get out of there. He turned toward the desk.

“You’re right, how *rude* of me,” he mocked, extending his right hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Chaman, je m’appelle John—

The man in the pinstriped suit snatched John’s wrist and slammed his arm onto the desk, twisting him onto his knees on the floor. John cried out in surprise and pain.

The man stood and stuck the prongs of his fork into John’s wound, which was now the size of a half-dollar. John screamed and squirmed on the floor, kicking at the desk. He tried to wrench free from the man’s grip but his arm felt locked to the desk. His body’s awkward positioning kept his reeling feet from finding solid purchase on the slippery concrete. The sight of the fork emerging from his palm made John’s stomach rumble and swell. The metal felt cold and alien beneath his skin, applied a pointillated, uncomfortable pressure on the back of his hand that seemed to pin it to the top of the

desk. But the worst part, and what actually made John try to scabble away harder, was that none of these feelings could be described as actual *pain*.

“I think,” the man said, “I know more about you than you ever will.”

* * *

The man Jean called *Chaman* wiped the blood from his fork onto a yellowed cloth he'd pulled from his desk drawer. There was something scrawled on it that John assumed was in ink but he couldn't make it out from his post on the floor. He doubted that he could've read the smudged and faded scratches anyway—they looked tribal, old. Hieroglyphics, but with what looked to be words interspersed between the icons.

He'd tried to escape once the man in the pinstriped suit had released him from his grasp, but Jo-Jo had stood in the doorway. Trying to push him through the bead curtain reminded John of wrestling with his dad on the living room floor when he was five. “Wait,” was all Jo-Jo had said. “Wait.” He remained in the doorway with his arms crossed, forearm muscles bulging and hiding his fists, twin stanchions and velvet rope sold separately.

John sat cross-legged on the floor and clutched his left wrist. Jean had torn off another tatter from his shorts—opting for the right leg that time to even things out a bit—after Chaman had left John in a squirming heap on the floor. He'd wound the semi-fresh strip around the soiled one to stop the darkening blood the prongs had coaxed forth. Now he was gesturing at John and arguing violently with the man in the pinstriped suit in Ewe, stabbing his right palm with his fingertips to accentuate his words.

“Come,” the man said, holding the cloth at arms length and inviting Jean behind the desk. Jean clucked his tongue and walked over to the desk, dangled the cloth between his fingertips. The man bent over and rummaged through the bottom drawer. He came up with a stack of bills and parsed out a number of purple *céfa* that John knew to be worth ten-thousand apiece. He held them out to Jean, who slapped them out of his hand and onto the desk. The man shrugged.

“Americain understand soon,” he said. Jean shook his head and muttered something in Ewe.

“This is fucking bullshit,” John said.

The man glanced over at Jean. “Mon ami,” Jean began, a somber look on his face.

“Fuck your *mon ami*. Get me a policeman.”

“Police no aid. This is Chaman—

“To hell with Chaman.” John tried to push himself off the concrete with his left hand but slumped back to the floor. “This asshole savage stabbed me and you want me to *stay*? For what, so he can shrink my head?”

Chaman leaned over the desk and extended his right hand toward John. “Is fine,” he said, nodding at his own palm. “No hurt, oui?” He winked at John.

“Fuck you.”

The man in the pinstriped suit laughed, bent down to look through his desk again.

John’s wound began to darken beneath the new bandage. “That’s assault, kidnapping, hell, maybe even attempted murder.” He pointed to each of the men standing

in the room. “All of you motherfuckers are going to jail. That lady with the do-rag, too, she’s an accomplice to all this horseshit.”

“Police no aid, mon ami.”

“Non,” Jo-Jo said.

John made a terrible, contemptuous face. He stared at his palm and seethed on the floor. *Police no aid*. He knew Jean was probably right, that the word of one belligerent *yovo* wouldn’t hold water against a handful of dissenting Togolese. Add that to the fact that he hadn’t seen a single policeman in Togoville or the capital, let alone an authority figure of any kind. This guy operating out of the back of Chicken Voodoo probably moonlighted as the local sheriff.

Chaman rose up holding a small figurine and placed it onto the desk. It looked similar to the idols John had seen scattered throughout Togoville only much smaller, about a foot high. The figurine was carved from stone and consisted of a large head resting on two small feet. Its face portrayed a scream, wide eyes with a gaping mouth, the lower jaw jutting out six inches with half-inch fangs on each side.

“What the hell is that?” John asked.

The man in the pinstriped suit pinched the cloth from Jean’s hand and placed it on the shelf created by the figurine’s jaw. “You went to see Goodluck, yes?”

“So what?”

“You go in basement?” He turned to John and reached inside the pocket of his jacket.

John skidded back against the wall. The man laughed and took out a small suede pouch. He held it next to his smiling face and shook it, then bent back down to the demonic thing on his desk. He loosened the drawstrings on the pouch and sifted a red powder into his right hand.

John looked to his two guides to see if they were as bewildered as him, but they were both watching the man's work intently. Chaman closed his hand into a fist and sprinkled the powder over the cloth.

"What's going on?" John asked. "What are you doing?"

"Goodluck tell you story of house, yes?" The man tightened the drawstrings on the pouch and placed it back in his jacket pocket. "Not whole, most like. Zanmaga tribe found there." He laughed. "Trés malade."

John stared into the idol's mouth and nodded like this all made sense to him, that the Zanmaga tribe was notoriously *malade*. But then he looked down at his wound. It seemed to be widening. Blood was seeping from underneath his dressings. His stomach rumbled.

"Oh, God," he said.

The man slipped a cigarette from a pack on the desk and fished a matchbook from his pants pocket.

"Chaman will know," Jean said. "He will aid."

John shook his head. "Oh, God."

"I think," the man said, lighting his cigarette, "this is God you should be talking to." He flipped the lit match into the idol's mouth. A brief flash filled the dim room with

red light. John glanced away from the brightness. When he turned back a small flame burned on the shelf of the idol's jaws—it seemed to be breathing fire, readying to spit doom from on high. Tendrils of black smoke wafted up from its mouth.

Chaman exhaled some of his own smoke into the cloud. "Zanmaga make war with Bula tribe. They small tribe..." Chaman held out his cigarette and bit his tongue, searching for the right word. "Pygmy," he said, gesturing to John with his cigarette. "Pygmy tribe."

John didn't reply, just stared into the idol's gaping mouth.

"Zanmaga vicious tribe," he continued, taking another drag from his cigarette. "They eat dead Bulas and put skulls on shields to show strength." He laughed. "Very strong. But very greedy." He drew a deep breath and puffed out his chest. "They want to swallow everything whole.

"Mais...one day they swallow more than they bellies hold. A group of six Zanmaga take boat to Togoville under darkness and take back Bula priest and his daughter. The priest named Akkam. Zanmaga believe that if they eat Akkam they own all of Bulas' strength."

"So why'd they take his daughter?" John asked.

Chaman smiled. "They always want one more bite after meal is finished. Even with full bellies." He blew smoke overhead. "But that one bite never satisfy."

"C'est vrai," Jean and Jo-Jo said in unison.

John felt sorry that he asked. He was beginning to feel sorry for a lot of things, number one being walking onto the tarmac in Abidjan.

“When they get to shore,” Chaman continued, “they take Akkam and his daughter deep into jungle and make them walk around a well seven times so they not know where they are. Then they throw them into a pit, a—” He gestured to John with his cigarette again. “Ravine? Is that word?”

John stared past Chaman and into the idol’s mouth. The smoke had turned grey, billowy.

“Ravine,” Chaman said. “Then Zanmaga get better idea—they going to make Akkam watch them eat his daughter. They want to eat his pain and fury. Better power, they think. Mais before they scoop her from ravine Akkam slip knife from his dashiki and slice her throat.”

That broke John’s concentration on the smoking idol. “That’s fucked up.”

“Mon ami,” Jean said, shaking his head.

Chaman turned to John and exhaled. “He take blood joy from Zanmaga. Is good.” He stamped out his butt on the concrete floor and lit another cigarette. “Before she die and before they grab Akkam he speak curse over her death. Over her blood. *Malédiction de sang*. Then he lick blade clean.”

“That’s *really* fucked up,” John said.

“Mon ami, it was only way—

“Only way for Bulas to be rid of Zanmaga,” Chaman said, taking a drag. “To sleep at night, walk to they huts. Akkam most brave, Americain.”

“C’est vrai,” Jean and Jo-Jo said in unison.

“So Akkam take what come. Zanamaga kill him and chop into pieces and roast him in pot. They only six so after Akkam they very full. Too full for one more bite, so they save daughter for later and go to sleep. Some wake sick, some wake dead.” Chaman leaned forward. “The dead eat the sick ones.”

John shook his head.

“Then the dead return to sleeping Zanamaga village. Lay waste in darkness.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” John said. His wound had stopped bleeding and held as a dark red circle in his palm.

“Portugais find them wandering through jungle at dawn,” Chaman said, “and bring them to slavehouse basement. Then British find Portugais. Then you find basement.” He blew smoke overhead, mingling it with the grey smoke emitting from the sculpture’s mouth. “Then we find you.”

“No one found me anywhere,” John said. He pointed at Jean and Jo-Jo. “They brought me here. And you’re trying to tell me I fell into some African voodoo curse down in that basement today?”

“We find out soon.”

John stiffened. “Well I don’t believe in curses or any of that stuff you were talking about. Besides, your story was full of holes—why didn’t the Zanamagas just tie both of them up so nothing would happen?”

“So Akkam could put curse on Zanamagas so they always be what they truly are.”

“C’est vrai,” Jean and Jo-Jo said in unison.

“This was many, many years ago.” He took a drag. “You no find any more Zanmagas. But you find Bulas,” he said, patting his chest.

The three men stared at John for a few moments, seeming to will him to understand. John looked around the room and then back up at Chaman. “But you’re not short. Well, pygmy-short. How could you be a Bula?”

Jean and Jo-Jo just kept staring at him. Chaman squinted and took another drag from his cigarette, exhaled slowly.

Just then the smoke fuming from the idol turned from grey to white and began emitting a foul stench, like burning trash. Chaman looked down at the idol and then back at John. He stretched out his arms palms up and rolled his eyes in the back of his head and began chanting in what John assumed was Ewe.

John pulled his hood overhead and held his maimed hand against his chest. His right arm seemed to awaken into a searing pain. He watched agape as his wound seemed to pulse to the chant, shrinking and widening in diameter beneath his bandages.

“Oh my God!” he yelled. “Make him stop! Make him stop!”

Jean and Jo-Jo didn’t move, stood with their heads bowed and eyes closed.

The man chanted louder, his body trembling with the force of it. Or the force of whatever he was channeling. John stared up into the fire-breathing idol. Pain froze him in place, clutching his wrist. His body shook with overwhelming chills and sickness and thirst. He prayed to a God above the idol that this wasn’t happening, that this was a dream. He feared that neither one of them would listen.

“Make it stop,” he cried out, but the sound drowned beneath the chanting.

The smoke turned a faint red and the man's chanting dwindled into an incoherent moan. The pain coursing through John's arm and the trembling sensations shaking his body receded. John hunched over and watched the fire shrink in the idol's mouth until its smoke was only a wisp of crimson.

The flame disappeared in a final red *poof* and John collapsed onto the floor, heaving for breath. The man ceased moaning and blinked rapidly. Neither of the other two moved.

Once he'd managed to catch his breath, at least as best as he could, John sat up against the wall. All three of the men were staring at him. He looked up at the mouth of the idol.

It was empty.

"Oh, God," he said.

"C'est vrai," Jean whispered.

The man stepped around the desk and crouched in front of John. His pantlegs rode up to reveal smooth dark-skinned legs and white ankle socks. He stared into John's quivering face, his eyes darting back and forth. He smiled thinly and spoke Ewe in a calm tone to the other men for a few moments.

"Oui," Jean said.

The man continued to stare at John while reaching back for something on the desk. John recoiled, tried to slide away along the wall.

"No," he moaned.

The man held up his other hand and John sat still, waiting for whatever blow was coming next, knowing that it couldn't be worse than what had happened since he'd been shoved into this awful backroom. Chaman smiled when his right hand found what it sought and held its prize in front of John's face.

Cigarettes.

He shook one out of the pack and slipped it between John's lips. It was unfiltered, and tasted sweet. He lit the cigarette with a match from the book in his pocket and stood, began speaking in Ewe with Jean and Jo-Jo. John remained on the floor against the wall and smoked without taking a drag, just breathed around and through the cigarette, in and out. He didn't believe any of the jungle campfire story, though he guessed it made sense in a Third-World-kind of way. And he didn't believe in that idol, either, or whatever kind of exam they thought they'd just given him. But something was wrong, much more wrong than before he came to this restaurant, and John had to admit that even he couldn't explain away why it was hard for him to move any part of his body at that moment. Why his body felt dead. A cold lump of meat. He exhaled, shuddering his lungs.

Jean started arguing with the man in the pinstriped suit and then Jo-Jo when he stepped over to try and pacify him. Jo-Jo placed a hand on his shoulder and Jean slung it off. The man continued speaking and didn't move or change the pitch or volume of his voice, though John couldn't make out what he was saying. This seemed to make Jean angrier—he gesticulated wildly, pointing at the man and then stabbing his fingertips into his pale right palm. The man in the pinstriped suit walked behind the desk and pulled a snub-nose revolver from a drawer. It was black with peeling duct-tape wrapped around

the stock, and looked like a popgun. He flipped open the cylinder and checked its contents, then flipped the gun shut and held it as his side.

Jean swiped at the air with his right hand. Though words were exploding out of him, John parsed out *non, sa famille, non, es mon ami, non, non, non...*

Chaman stopped speaking and listened to Jean's pleas for a few moments. He looked down at John, studied him up and down.

"D'accord," he said, holding up his hands. "D'accord. Nous ne serons pas le teur. Mais—

"Mais?" Jean said, crossing his arms.

The man began to speak in Ewe again, in that same calm, even tone. It was almost soothing. John didn't move from the wall, just kept staring and breathing smoke through his teeth. He wanted to close his eyes but knew he couldn't, knew he needed to watch the gun in the man's hand. He knew that should be more important to him, *most* important, but he couldn't stop thinking about the absence and recurrence and absence of pain in his right arm and the idol's teeth and the red flame and the smoke and the way it felt to stick his finger into his wound like this the cool flesh so cool in this heat and the smoke—

The smoke spiraling from John's dangling cigarette stung his eyes. He jolted and pulled his left hand away from his palm. *Out* of his palm. He watched Jean and Jo-Jo nodding as Chaman spoke, this time never uttering a word or making a face of disagreement. Just stoic acceptance.

The man pointed to a silver watch on his wrist a couple of times as he spoke. John wondered what it was that Chaman was convincing them to do, and if the act would be as easy as its acceptance.

The man slipped the revolver into his jacket and then crouched back down and faced John. He lifted the cigarette from his mouth and stubbed it out on the concrete floor. John stared at the black mark left on the pavement and thought it matched the one on his palm. He made a grimacing smile.

“I think,” the man said, “it is time for you to leave Togo.”

“Oui,” John said.

Chaman nodded at Jo-Jo, who moved from the doorway and bent to help John off the floor. He slipped both of his hands under John’s arms.

Chaman made a *tsk* sound and Jo-Jo backed away. He grabbed John’s left hand and pulled him up. John shook his head, came back into focus. Pangs of thirst and sickness swelled through his body.

The man smiled. “Au revoir.”

“Yeah, you too,” John said. He held his left hand against his stomach and made for the door, but then burst into another coughing fit, this one powerful enough to send him to the ground on all fours. Jean and Jo-Jo backed away. Chaman jerked his head backward and retreated behind the desk. The hacking coughs rattled in John’s chest, sprayed tiny droplets of blood onto the concrete floor. He crouched for a few moments after it was over, heaving.

“Mon ami?” Jean asked.

John finally caught his breath and struggled to his feet. Jean bent down and helped him up, shaking a hand at Chaman and *tsk-tsking* before he could make a sound.

John's right hand left a half-dollar-sized bloodstain on the floor when he stood. He held it against his chest and shivered, looked up at Jean. "Just get me the fuck out of here."

Jean patted him on the back. "Is okay. We go now. We fast to airport."

"No to worry," Jo-Jo said.

Jean ushered his charge toward the doorway but Chaman yelled for him to wait. John looked over his shoulder to see what the holdup was.

"Let's go," he said.

Chaman glanced at Jean and angled his head toward the desk. "Pour le sang," he said.

Jean nodded, thinking for a few seconds, then turned and grabbed the scattered bills off the desk and stuffed them into his pocket.

John stared at him and then turned back toward the doorway. Jean hopped over to him and patted him on the back again.

"We go, we go," he said, then whispered "Je suis désolé, mon ami. C'est vrai—

"Américain," the man said.

The three men turned around.

"Have safe flight." He grinned. "*Mon ami.*"

John staggered through the bead curtain and into the dining room. Jean and Jo-Jo stepped behind him and each placed a hand on his shoulder. The chair Jo-Jo had sat in

still lay on its side, one of its skulls flashing a hillbilly grin. John's yellowish vomit still puddled on the floor, on the table, in the platter of discarded chicken things. They didn't slow down to clean up the mess or pick up the chair, just made for the door. The woman in the red scarf peeked over the counter to watch them go.

Everyone was still in the van looking out the windows. Jo-Jo climbed into the driver's seat and the other two shuffled around to the other side. Lauren leaned over and unlocked the sliding door as they approached. Jean opened the door and helped ease John inside before hopping into the passenger seat.

"Oh my God, baby! What happened?" Lauren said. "You're completely pale."

"I got sick again in there," John said. "I think you're right—something's happening to me."

"What is it?"

"I don't know." John curled up against her. "I just want to go home."

Stan and Myra leaned in. "Well, what was so important that we had to come here?" Stan asked. "Was it worth it?"

"Non," Jean said, exhaling. He nodded at Jo-Jo, who turned the keys in the ignition. "It no of aid."

Chapter Four

The darkness was fulfilling. Consuming. It absorbed the dull ache trembling through John's body and asked nothing in return. It felt more like floating than falling, the way he'd slept that night after ingesting all that Imperial. A rock skimming over a pond, one, two, three jumps and then lingering in a muddled meniscus, taking a final breath before being enveloped in algae and murk and then drifting downward into the blue-green then black depths, no force left to retrieve it from its trajectory. Down, down toward a soft bed of mud and shale and weeds where only indiscriminate catfish nosed about his smooth, sunken existence.

Then the water thickened, turned crimson. Floating faces and torsos orbited around him, leering, and John reached out to feel them, help them. They didn't belong down there with him. The apparitions dodged his grasp and circled faster, their eyes delving through his sedimentary layers to some cold, alien nucleus. John recognized they were the eyes of Stan, Myra, Jean. And Lauren. He lashed out and sent them spinning faster, finally latching onto one and then the next, rending each asunder.

Lenny petting his rabbits.

John watched scarlet pour around and over him. He gurgled within it, drowning himself. It tasted sweet.

He groaned against Lauren's chest. "No, no," he said. "Get away from here."

"Shhhh," she whispered, patting his head. "It's okay, baby, it's okay. We're going home." His hair was soaked through. Lauren looked back at her mom and bit her lip, gave a slight shake of her head. Myra reached over and gripped her knee.

John moaned and burrowed into Lauren's chest.

"It's so strange," Lauren said. "He's burning up again, but a few minutes ago he felt completely cold. It's like his fever roars up after he breaks it over and over again."

"Poor thing," Myra said, frowning.

"Must be some kind of African virus or something," Stan offered.

"Bless his heart," Myra said.

"I don't know," Lauren said, "this feels like something worse than that. Like he's draining away."

"God, do you think he's *dying*?" Myra asked, clutching her visor.

"No, I don't think that, yet. I don't think it could burn through him that fast." She stroked John's sodden hair again. "But I think it's trying."

"Did he get infected with this down in the basement?" Stan asked.

Lauren eyed John's wounded hand twitching in her lap. "He had to've. Where else? Unless..." She looked up at Jean, who was watching her husband from behind the passenger seat and rubbing his chin. Next to him Jo-Jo hunched over the steering wheel, alternating gears and lurching the van around and behind the packs of motos clogging the traffic lanes.

"What the hell happened back there?" she said.

Jean kept watching her husband writhe against her.

"Jean? Hey!"

He blinked a few times and looked over at Lauren. "Quoi?"

"What happened? In the restaurant?"

“We try to help.” Jean parted the air with his hands. “Is all.”

“Looks like you did a bang-up job,” Stan said.

“Look at him!” Lauren yelled. “He’s ten times worse than before.”

John moaned, emphasizing her point.

“We try to help,” Jean stammered, “we no want to hurt.”

“So you did hurt him?” Stan said, leaning over the bench.

Jean held his hands in front of him. “Non, non. No hurt. We meet with cham—

“Healer,” Jo-Jo interrupted. “Back of restaurant.”

“Healer, my ass,” Lauren said. “What’d you let him do to my husband?”

Three motos cut off the van and Jo-Jo downshifted and slammed on the brakes, yelling curses in Ewe. Jean turned and braced himself against the dashboard. Stan’s chest jammed into the bench in front of him, but that enabled him to reach over with both arms and keep Myra and Lauren from tumbling out of their seats. He needed a third arm to save John, though, who dropped onto the floor of the van with a *thud*.

“Jesus Christ, watch the road!” Stan yelled.

Jean and Jo-Jo began yelling at each other in Ewe, with Jo-Jo gesturing at the motos zipping past them, scooting between cars. Lauren leaned over to examine John on the ground, started to pat his chest and arms as if that would help her verify that he was alright.

“Baby, are you okay? I’m so sorry. I should’ve held onto you tighter.”

“It’s not your fault, Lauren,” Stan said, “you’re not the one piloting this piece of shit.”

“*Stanley*,” Myra said.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said, smoothing John’s hair. “Do you think you can get back up?”

John’s eyes had creaked open when the back of his head bounced off the floor. He blinked away the red world of his dreams and squinted in the soft gray light of dusk.

Lauren’s hovering face came into focus, and then the rust-stained interior roof of the van.

“Hey,” she said, smiling, though John could see the concern in her eyes.

“Why am I on the floor?”

“We stopped real fast and I couldn’t hold you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Why are you smiling?”

Lauren sniffed. “I’m just glad you’re awake.”

John nodded. “I don’t want to fall asleep again.”

“Do you think you’re okay?”

He shook his head. Lauren forced a smile and nodded slightly, her eyes brimming.

“But I’ll live,” he said.

Lauren scooped her arms beneath John’s shoulders to ease him back into the bench seat. The back of his red t-shirt was soaked.

Jean leaned over to help.

“*No*,” Lauren snapped. “You’ve done enough already.” Jean turned and slumped in his seat.

Lauren got John into a seating position but couldn't quite get him all the way up, so he grabbed her left knee and shakily pushed himself up and hovered over the bench before plopping down.

He left a smear of blood on her skin.

"Shit," he said, and wiped off the blood with the edge of his t-shirt. He held his right palm out to Lauren and they both examined it in her lap. It was hard to get a good look in the dim light. The blood had leaked through the canvas bandage again, but it held, wasn't running down his palm. The wound still appeared to be the size of a half dollar.

It pulsed slightly. His hand felt like ice.

"What is it?" Myra asked, leaning in.

"It's nothing," Lauren said, "we just need to change his bandage soon. The gash isn't clotting up."

"Still?" Stan said.

"I knew we should've gone to the airport earlier," Myra said, "then we'd have enough time to get him taken care of."

"It's fine, really."

John looked over at Lauren, who raised her eyebrows at him. "Yeah, it's fine," he said. "No to worry."

John leaned back and turned to face the window. Lauren grasped his hand and kept it in her lap. Outside, the multi-colored cinder-block shacks lining the streets of Lomé and the people loitering in front of them whizzed past. Their bright yellows and oranges and blues were dulled by the dusk, rendering them as pastels. Motos flanked

John's side of the van but their drivers didn't return his stare. He half hoped to see the pink-haired girl appear on the back of one. To see what she would do. To apologize to her in broken French. To tear her to pieces, maybe, rip that cold gaze straight off her face.

"So you going to tell us what happened in that restaurant?" Stan asked.

"Stanley, leave him alone," Myra said. "He doesn't feel good."

"What? The two natives up there aren't spilling the beans."

John closed his eyes. He didn't want to tell anybody about what happened in that back room. At least, not now. And he wasn't even sure if it actually *did* happen—he was having some pretty strange dreams. But he knew he couldn't tell them about the fork and his blood smoking in that god-forsaken idol's mouth, much less Chaman pulling out his West African special and Jean bargaining for his life.

Or feeling the cold meat inside his own hand.

He didn't know what they would do, and that was the problem: the last thing he needed to do was set off Stan or Lauren and have them attack Jean and Jo-Jo and land in a Togolese holding cell. He needed to get on that plane, and to the Western medicine readily available when it landed.

"What changed?" John said.

"I don't follow."

John peered over the seat. "You didn't seem all that anxious to find out about the restaurant earlier."

Lauren smiled and squeezed John's wrist.

"Come on," Stan said, "you've obviously taken a turn since you left there."

“I appreciate your concern.”

Stan blinked his raccoon eyes. “What, you’re mad at *me*?”

“You said we were going inside to figure out what was so *damn* important about the place—

“I said you should go in there.”

“You said *let’s*, as in let *us* go in there. Because it was just a restaurant.”

Stan tilted his head at him. “Well, I meant you.”

“Can we settle down, here?” Lauren said. “Baby, what happened inside the restaurant? Did you get sick again?”

John slipped his sodden cap back onto his head. “Yeah, I threw up again.” His stomach rumbled at the thought of it.

“Poor thing,” Myra said, “he can’t keep anything down.”

“Jo-Jo said something about a healer,” Lauren said. “Did he do something to you?”

Jean turned around and glanced at John, biting his lip. John looked out his window.

“No,” he said. “He didn’t really do anything.”

Lauren tucked two fingers beneath John’s chin and shepherded his face back to hers. “Don’t be afraid, you can tell me. Nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

John looked in his wife’s eyes and wavered. He wanted to tell her the whole damn thing—*somebody* should know what happened to him in that back room. It was too big to keep to himself, the knowledge that someone could stab him, hold him against his will,

and threaten to kill him and yet nothing would ever happen to that sonofabitch. John probably hadn't been the first person Chaman menaced before—there'd been a rhythm to the scene, a professional nonchalance. But that's just what it was: a scene. Just some contrived bullshit, probably to try and get some money out of him. And John wasn't going to let it scare him anymore, or the others.

“It was just a bunch of bullshit,” he said, believing it.

“What was?”

“There was this kind of medicine man there, sure. But he wasn't wearing a necklace made of skulls or a grass skirt or anything like that.”

“What, no bone through his nose?” Stan said.

John laughed. “Nah, he was wearing a suit. A pinstriped suit. Anyway, he was shouting something about a curse from a long time ago. I think they were just trying to scare me.”

Jean held up his hands. “Non, no scare.”

“I don't understand,” Lauren said, “why would they want to scare you?”

“So he'd give them money for a bullshit antidote,” Stan said.

“Bingo,” John said.

Lauren shook her head. “What curse was the medicine man talking about?”

“What does it matter? I didn't buy it.”

Lauren hunched her shoulders. *Well?*

John sighed. “I don't know, some kind of tribal blood curse. A revenge against somebody.”

“Who?”

“The Zapatas, or something—

“Zanmagas,” Jean said.

“Them.” John gestured to the front seat in affirmation. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter. I got sick in there, yeah, but that’s it. All that voodoo stuff didn’t make any sense.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Stan said.

“I’m glad you feel at ease about it, Stan. Really.”

“Look, I’m not going to argue about this anymore. There was no way I could’ve gone in there.”

“What? Why the hell not?”

“I needed to stay and guard the luggage.”

“Guard the *luggage*? What, you thought you could stop someone from climbing up top and taking a bag if they *really* wanted to?”

“Well someone needed to stay here and watch it, at least, to keep people away.”

John shook his head and stared back out his window. “I think the ladies could’ve handled it.”

Stan sat back and crossed his arms. “Agree to disagree.”

John turned to say something along the lines of *that’s about the only thing we’ve ever agreed on*, but a sharp gurgling boiled up from his gut.

“Stop,” he said, shaking. “Stopthecar stopthecar.”

“What is it?” Lauren yelled. “Are you going to be sick?”

John shook his head quickly and grunted. “Mmmm, mmmm.”

Lauren slapped the back of Jo-Jo’s seat. “Pull over! Pull over! He’s going to be sick.”

Jo-Jo gestured to the snarling traffic and shouted something in Ewe to Jean. Jean shouted back and pointed at the side of the road. Jo-Jo downshifted and pumped the brake, then careened to the shoulder and hopped the front wheel over the short curb. Motos beeped at the yellow van as they zoomed by on the left.

John slid the door open and launched out onto the sidewalk, hunched over on his knees and holding his stomach. Men and women lining the sidewalk took a few steps back and watched, smoking. Most of the spectators were young and dark-skinned, almost completely black, the men wearing jeans and faded t-shirts and sandals and the women in sundresses or tube-tops over leather skirts. John wondered where all the dashikis went.

Lauren crouched by him and rubbed his back. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay.”

John could tell by the tremor in her voice that she didn’t believe this was okay, whether that meant his persistent sickness or the crowd of onlookers or both. Whichever it was, she was right on all accounts.

But he didn’t have much time to consider this—the vengeful gurgling had grown. And it was moving away from his gut. Lower.

He staggered to his feet and wandered a few steps down the sidewalk, then circled back. The spectators moved back a couple of feet.

“Where are you going?” Lauren shouted.

John didn't answer. He wiped the sweat running into his eyes and hurried toward the nearest storefront. He paused at the open doorway and wondered if the dimly lit establishment even had a restroom, if it had another back room like the one in Chicken Voodoo, if it had another bullshit Chaman that would want to finish the job this time.

He turned and stumbled into a café table, placing his good hand onto the pavement to keep himself from falling. The only move the two men sitting at the table made was to pick up their drinks from the tilting surface. John bearcrawled around the table and to the side of the building. He leaned against the smooth cinder-block wall and didn't waste a second to see if the coast was clear because it never would be.

He unbuttoned his shorts and pulled them down to his ankles and squatted against the wall just before a torrent of orange lava burned out of him and splashed onto the pavement. That sent the spectators scuttling.

“Oh, Jesus,” Lauren said.

John hunched over and grimaced as the rest sputtered down the wall. When he was sure he was running on empty he reached down and slid his boxers around his flip-flops. He used them to soak up the mess on himself and then tossed them blindly into the puddle of filth on the ground. If he'd stopped to look at the orange mess he'd left on the pavement before hoisting his shorts and staggering back to Lauren, he would've seen the black clots of blood swirling in its center. Instead, he stared into the direction the van was heading and saw the air traffic towers waiting about a mile away.

Lauren put her arm around him and helped him toward the van. “I'm so sorry, baby,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” John whispered. “We were almost there.”

“Don’t worry about that, now.”

Once they settled into their bench, Lauren slapped Jo-Jo’s seat. The two West Africans turned to face the road and Jo-Jo lurched the van into traffic. John shivered against the seatback and settled his head onto Lauren’s chest.

“Holy *shit*,” Stan muttered.

“Dad.”

“I’m just saying, I’ve never seen—

“*Dad*. Not another word, I’m serious.”

They sped to the airport in silence.

* * *

Jo-Jo screeched to the curb in front of Lomé-Tokoin Airport. It was the nicest structure John had seen since they’d left Accra for Togo. The modern façade of the lone, expansive terminal resembled a modern art museum—the levels of long, single panes of frosted glass were intersected by alternating concave and convex tile roofs every fifteen feet to create a tiered, pyramid-like design. The wave-like architecture of the overhangs made the airport appear as if it possessed a series of wings. But the closer they’d gotten to the airport revealed the true structure behind the modern façade.

The initial rising glass levels of the terminal gave way to a one-story building you’d see in most suburban office parks throughout America: brown and bland, with evenly spaced cement columns and sliding glass doors. The loading/unloading area beyond the curb was slick pavement. A black wrought-iron fence with squared edges

defended the two entry lanes from the parking lot. Darkness had eclipsed the dusk during the final stretch run to the airport, and orange halogen lamps lit their emergence from the van.

Jean climbed onto the roof and started passing the luggage down to Jo-Jo, who took each suitcase with his left hand and lined them up on the pavement with his right.

“Thank God, we made it,” Lauren said.

Myra held up her watch. “With one hour and twenty-seven minutes to spare.”

“See? I told you we’d get here,” Stan said.

John leaned against a column. He wasn’t sure if he could make it another eighty-seven minutes. The rumbling in his gut hadn’t returned since the incident on the side of the road, but he could tell his fever was back—his whole body rang with tremors so every step he took felt deliberate, ginger. He alternated between tying his jacket around his waist and slipping it back on, pulling the hood over his Red Sox cap. His eyes winced even in the weak amber light of the portico, but when he shut them his head swam, making him feel like he would drop where he stood.

He was getting really sick of this shit.

Something was wrong. Maybe even that bullshit Chaman was talking about—

No.

He couldn’t go there yet. But he didn’t think he could make it another eighty-six minutes, either.

He overheard Stan asking Myra what he should tip their two guides. Jesus.

“I mean, how much do you think I should dock them for what happened today, hun?” he asked. “We wouldn’t have made it through the rest of the trip without them.”

“We certainly wouldn’t have,” Myra agreed. “But still.”

“I just feel bad about it because they live here, you know? The natives out here need it more than us.”

John couldn’t believe that Stan felt bad for them, of all people, when he was wilted against a column. But then he decided he *could* believe it. He opened his mouth to tell them about the money Jean pocketed in the restaurant, but thought better of it—no time to waste on explanations.

Lauren stepped over to where Stan and Myra were standing. “Are you kidding me, right now?”

“What?” Stan said.

“They can hear what you’re saying.”

“Oh.” Stan turned and saw Jo-Jo staring at him, all their bags lined up on the pavement. He slipped two one-thousand céfa bills from his wallet and handed one to Jo-Jo and one to Jean, who’d just hopped down from the roof of the van. The two men looked at the money in their hand and then at each other, then stuffed it into their pocket.

Stan gave each of them a firm handshake and then started moving the bags toward the check-in kiosk.

Myra gave Jean a big hug. “Thank you so much for getting us here,” she said. She gave Jo-Jo a quick side-hug and scurried over to Stan.

“Lauren,” Jean said, beckoning to her. He said it *Laur-on*.

She inched over to him and flinched when he put his arms around her. John moved away from the column and stood a little closer.

Jean whispered something into Lauren's ear and then nodded solemnly when she backed away. She stepped a few paces backwards and bumped into John, holding on to him.

"It's okay," John said, and kissed the top of her head. "Go check in. I'm right behind you."

Lauren looked up at him and kissed his cheek, then joined her parents at the kiosk.

John wasn't sure how to approach the two men, now that their parting moment was at hand. Turning his shoulder in disdain? Spitting onto the concrete? Dealing out a couple hard shoves? He didn't think he had the strength for that, at least. And he wasn't sure, here at the end—he felt that Jean had meant well and hadn't wanted things to happen like they had. A cultural misunderstanding, maybe. Of course, that still didn't change what happened to him that day. Christ, had it all happened on the same day?

After all, it had been *Stan's* brilliant idea to visit the slave house. And its godless basement.

John held out his right hand, a reflex, but then held out his left when the two men recoiled a bit. Jean and Jo-Jo clasped their hands behind their backs.

John stood there in the orange light like a dummy, his orphaned left hand hanging in the air. He looked into the eyes of each man. Jo-Jo returned his cold stare. Jean blinked back a few tears.

“I sorry, mon ami,” he said, his lips quavering.

“Fuck you,” John said. He turned, grabbing the last bag with his good hand.

“John.” The Ivorian said it like his own name.

John turned around.

“I hope you make flight.” Jean nodded. “Au revoir, mon ami.”

John wheeled his bag over to the kiosk, where the others had already checked in. He dug his passport and itinerary from his backpack and handed them to the clerk, who looked like a gorilla wearing a bellhop uniform. John didn't care if that thought was a bit racist, if it was something Stan might've said—he was tired of this continent and its cold, selfish people. Even the ones you seemingly make friends with either wanted something in the end or were all too happy to cut you loose. For the millionth time, he wished he'd never taken this trip. He didn't even want to spend the next eighty minutes there, if he could make it that long.

The clerk smiled and returned John's documents, waved him along. The four travelers rolled their luggage through the sliding glass doors and into the stale air of the terminal. Stan, Myra, and Lauren got in line for the initial security checkpoint.

John turned and watched the doors close them in. Once they shut, Jean and Jo-Jo bounded into the yellow van and sped off into the night.

Chapter Five

“You know, it’s a wonder nine-eleven didn’t start right here,” Stan said.

“Jesus, Dad.”

“What? What’d I say?”

“You can’t say that in an airport,” Lauren said.

“Nine-Eleven?”

“*Shhhh*,” Myra hushed.

“What? Don’t anybody speak English here.”

“Everyone knows what those numbers mean. Especially when a yovo’s saying them.”

“Yeah, and why can’t I say them?” Stan sat up, leaned across their table. “I lost a lot of brothers that day, and I’ve seen my share of shit, too. So I think I’ll say what I want whenever I want—

“Okay, Stan,” Myra said.

He gestured at the surrounding terminal. “Look, I just—

Myra patted his hand. “Please.”

Stan crossed his arms and slouched in his hard, orange plastic chair, like a kindergartener prepared to refuse his allotted carpet square. His godawful wraparound shades hung around his neck, and John couldn’t stop staring at that raccoon mask pasted across his eyes.

He shifted his focus to the paper basket of cold fries sitting in front of him on the table. Lauren had tried to coax a few fries into him, and John knew he needed to get

something into his stomach, but just a whiff of fried potatoes was enough to send his stomach roiling. He pushed them away and drained the last of his Sprite, clanking the empty can on the table. When he was growing up his mom had always brought home some ginger ale when he felt sick, or Sprite if ginger ale wasn't available, though the childhood John never understood how ginger ale wasn't always available—*someone* was selling ginger ale in the city, you just had to look in enough stores to find it. So, assuming ginger ale wasn't going to be an option, he bought a can of Sprite from the little airport food counter they were sitting in front of in hopes of soothing his nausea.

It didn't help.

"All I'm saying is security could be a little tighter here," Stan said, his arms still crossed. "We could've taken anything through there."

"Really, Dad?" Lauren said. "Anything?"

"Pretty much. Look, I'm not saying I could've smuggled my gun—

"*Shhhh*," Myra said.

"My *gun*," Stan said, mouthing the word, "but Sickboy over here carried a half-full water bottle straight through security."

That was true—John had carried the water Stan had loaned him straight through the initial security checkpoint before getting their boarding passes at the Brussels Airlines desk. It hadn't been at all like in The States: no taking off of shoes or belts, no doffing of caps, no standing in a booth with your arms clasped overhead while a revolving scanner whirs around you. And, most noticeably, no worries about liquids of the seemingly non-

lethal variety—body wash, shaving cream, water, all were welcomed by Togolese airport security, three-ounce size limitations be damned.

Sure, there'd been a metal detector, and John had emptied his pockets into one of those little white plastic bowls. And, yeah, he'd been required to sling his backpack onto the x-ray machine's conveyor belt, but otherwise he'd scuffled through the metal detector wicket unmolested, large swishing water bottle, high-grade fever, and seeming bout with dysentery in tow. He'd even taken a swig in front of the pudgy, bearded West African in a white uniform staring through the screen above the conveyor belt—maybe some things were just like in The States.

The attendant at the airline counter had been a pretty French-speaking girl with toffee-colored skin and dark, wavy hair pulled back in a loose bun. Not that John had really noticed.

“Is he okay?” she'd asked, eyes wide, skeptical.

“He's *fine*,” Lauren had said, though John had taken no offense at the girl's concern. Or disgust, whichever it was—he felt pale, spread thin, every step he took a shaking, conscious decision instead of an effortless motion.

The girl's English was pretty flawless, nuanced by her French accent. After checking John and Lauren in she'd bent down to wrap their destination tags around the handles of their luggage. Their barcodes read *DFW*. John had thought about the idea of Dallas, that they must be taking a spaceship to get there from here. That a hospital in Brussels was eight hours away.

That he might not make it there.

John regarded Stan with a reptilian gaze. A horrible vision came to him of lunging across the white plastic table, cold fries tumbling onto the tile below, and clawing Stan's eyes until they were obliterated from his pasty sockets. He'd move down to Stan's throat once his eyes were pouring down his cheeks and take a wet bite out of his larynx so Stan would shut the fuck *up* for once—John shuddered. His stomach gave a slight lurch.

“Don't call me 'Sickboy,'” he said.

Stan shrugged. “Look, all I'm saying is that could've been a bottle full of nitro or something, and they wouldn't have known.”

Lauren fished an apple out of her purse and held it up. “Look out, Dad, this could be a bomb.”

“*Shhhh*,” Stan mocked.

Lauren rolled her eyes.

“But maybe you're right, maybe there's nothing to worry about,” Stan said.

“There's not many Muslims here, so nine-eleven couldn't have started here, anyway.”

Lauren slumped her face into her palm.

John got up to get another Sprite. They'd been sitting in this café-ish place for about twenty minutes, the other six plastic tables and chairs of assorted colors empty the whole time. Stan and Myra hadn't been sure that there'd be another place to grab a bite once they'd moved deeper into the terminal, so they'd directed the party to the food counter outside Customs. They might have been able to obtain sustenance at the duty free shop just beyond the smudged glass of the next terminal barrier, sure, but the Joneses had no desire to take that chance—you never know what kind of weird shit you'll find in a

duty free shop, especially an African one. And despite Stan's poor airport security-related word choices, the three Togolese women in white smocks and white aprons manning the fryers behind the counter apparently couldn't have cared less and handed John his soda without a blink.

Lauren scratched John's back. "Is the Sprite helping, baby?"

"It's not making anything worse, at least." John's stomach rumbled again as it received the lemon-lime nothingness he poured down his throat. The intense thirst he'd first felt outside the slave house hadn't abated, and John had already slammed back half of the can before he placed it back on the table. He wondered if you were supposed to be this thirsty after throwing up as he had, if it was simply natural for your body to yearn to be filled after losing so much. Or if maybe this thirst went hand-in-hand with the visions he'd experienced in the past hour, a minor hanger-on tagging along with the other serious symptoms of his illness. But this thirst wasn't something he'd ever experienced—it was a chasm, an abyss that stretched from the back of his throat and down into the nether regions of his gut. He stared at the washer-sized wound pulsing under the bandage across his right palm. He wondered if he was dying, if this is what dying feels like for everyone before it comes, a deepening hole that requires love or time or liquid, and took a ginger sip of Sprite.

"I can't stomach another soda, either," Stan said. "I've never drank so many regular cokes in my life." He flicked the tab of his coke can. "Dr. Shields is going to have to bring in a mixing truck for my fillings when we get home."

"So get a water, honey," Myra said.

“All they have is bags.”

John felt annoyed, at both Stan’s delicate sensibilities and “stomaching soda” comment, but there was a pang of guilt, too. Stan had acquired an aversion to the water bags almost immediately, saying that he didn’t trust their contents were clean enough. He’d opted to spend a few more céfa for bottled water whenever he could, but those opportunities became more and more scarce when they ventured away from the cities. And he’d shared his last water bottle with John after John had left his and Lauren’s on the shore of Lake Togo.

John slipped the water bottle from the side pocket of his backpack. “Here, you can have some.”

Stan held up his hand. “Nah, I’m okay.”

“No, really. I know you want some water. You probably won’t be able to get anything but bags until we get on the plane.”

“It’s fine. I shouldn’t really complain, anyway.”

John took the top off the bottle and continued holding it out to him. “C’mon, I feel bad for taking your last one.”

“No, really. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Just take it, Dad,” Lauren said.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Myra said.

Stan dragged the bottle from John’s fingertips.

“I don’t think whatever I have is contagious,” John said.

“How can you be sure?” Stan asked.

John's mind flashed to the basement, the restaurant, Chaman's ridiculous-yet-maybe-not-so-ridiculous story. His index finger absent-mindedly traced the circumference of his wound.

"Call it a hunch."

Stan frowned at the bottle for a few seconds. He stared at its contents, shook them around some to see if anything ominous would emerge from the waters. Whatever he saw must have been convincing enough—he plucked the plastic cap from John's good hand and screwed it back onto the bottle.

"So I guess you're not as sure as I am?"

Stan slid the bottle across the table. "Call it a hunch."

* * *

John tossed his untouched fries into the trash, and the fearsome foursome made their way through a set of nearby sliding doors and headed toward Customs. Just past the duty free shop they ran smack into another security checkpoint, this one replete with Uzi-toting guards. Two large, armed guards in blue uniforms forced travelers to empty their pockets again and place any bags on another conveyor belt feeding an x-ray machine. The guards then herded them through a metal detector to another man who scrutinized their passports and posed questions with a serious look on his face. The sub-machine gun strapped to his torso lurked against his thigh, bouncing heavily whenever the guard shifted his weight.

John turned to Stan. "Satisfied?"

"I stand overcorrected."

“Well, I think it’s ridiculous,” Myra said, adjusting her visor.

“They probably heard what you said, Dad,” Lauren said, “so they wanted to make sure that nine-eleven doesn’t happen again on their watch.”

“I’m flattered.”

John slunk past the first set of guards, nodding at their French instructions. He dropped his backpack onto the conveyor belt and deposited his keys and wallet and phone into a shallow plastic bowl. The scowling guard who waited for him at the end of the conveyor belt made him not want to repeat this process—you never want to frustrate an angry looking dude holding an automatic weapon, especially if they don’t speak your language—so he patted himself down to make sure he didn’t forget anything that might trip the metal detector. His right hand felt a clump near the middle of his thigh.

He tried to reach deep into his pocket but the bandage wrapped around his palm wouldn’t let him get far enough.

“Could you reach into my right pocket?” he asked Lauren.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

“Just do it. I can’t reach something down there.”

Lauren laughed and fished around in his pocket. She came up with a wad of green, blue, and red céfa.

“Look at you, moneybags,” she said.

“Careful, that’s the down payment for our summer hut on Lake Togo. Don’t you go losing it.”

Lauren kissed John's cheek and tossed the money into the bowl with the rest of his stuff. She felt his burning forehead, and her smile tightened.

"We're almost there," she whispered in his ear, then nudged him toward the metal detector.

John staggered through the metal detector, arms outstretched, his good hand clutching his passport. The guard at the end of the line held up his hand and then motioned to John's things once they emerged from the x-ray machine. He snatched John's passport and started flipping through it just before John bent down to grab his backpack.

The guard reached down and grasped John's wrist as he was slipping his belongings into his pockets. John tensed and looked up into the guard's eyes, which didn't betray any interest or alarm. But John couldn't help but wonder: was this it? Did this armed guard think something was off about him? That he was visibly ill, but more than just sick? That he was an abomination, something wholly unfit for this world that must be dispatched swiftly and resolutely with a bullet hard and fast to the head?

Did *John* really think that?

No. He couldn't believe that. But things were clicking, and the fact that they were *here*, finally, heading back to the level of civilization he'd been dreaming about for three days and yet he didn't feel any better was quite disconcerting.

Surely the guard had discerned that much from his face. John halfway hoped that he had. That an abrupt end would be brutal, yes, but maybe he'd feel better, and the idea of feeling better was almost worth dying for. You could've sold him on the idea with a

decent enough pitch—floormats included, and you’ll never have to fall asleep and have one of *those* dreams ever, ever again—

“Where you go?” the guard asked.

“Huh?” John asked, coming back into focus.

“Where you go?” The guard smiled, placed his fingertips on the folded colorful bills in John’s plastic bowl.

John looked down at the West African money and back up at the guard, who wasn’t wearing a nametag. “Les États-Unis, monsieur.”

“Oui,” the guard said, nodding at John. “No need, non?” He picked all three green bills from John’s pile—each one worth 5,000—and stuffed them into his pocket. He left the remaining blue and red monies, worth 2,000 and 1,000, respectively, where they were. The guard shrugged to see if John was in agreement.

John had hoped to save those colorful bills as souvenirs—he certainly wasn’t planning on visiting a place where they’d be of use ever again. Or dropping them on a down payment for a quaint little hut on Lake Togo, pole-powered canoe not included. So, no, he wouldn’t be *needing* the céfa at all. But still.

He glanced at the Uzi trembling against the guard’s hip and then up at his eyes.

“Oui,” John said. He nodded and folded the leftover money into his pocket.

John was in agreement.

* * *

The Customs area consisted of two clerks standing in booths sheathed in bulletproof glass. Each booth contained a white desk, severely outdated computer, and

frowning West African, and flanked a tinted-glass revolving door that John prayed led to the final compartment of the terminal, a place with actual *gates* and planes being boarded from them.

The clerks took the group's passports and travel visas from them one at a time and then typed their information into the computer. John visited the one on the right, who seemed to only know one word of English:

“Purpose?” he said.

“Tourism,” John answered, knowing that wasn't the right word in French but figuring it was close enough.

It was—the Customs official stamped John's passport and directed him to the revolving door. Luckily, he hadn't demanded the same unofficial exit fee as the previous guard because he didn't have enough souvenir cash to foot the bill.

The door spun John into an anteroom with a tiled floor and rows of plastic chairs all facing a TV blaring a French news channel. The wide windows behind the TV provided a view of the tarmac and the stands of eucalyptus and palms lining the concrete, the jungle threatening to swallow the airport whole and keep John and his family from ever getting off this floating turd of a continent.

John was shivering. Lauren emerged from behind and slipped her arms around him.

“I thought we'd be at our gate by now,” he said.

Lauren pointed down a hallway snaking away from the main room that led to a bathroom alcove, a small wooden bar with four stools, and, finally, a small room behind a glass wall with the number “4” displayed over it.

“C’mon,” she said, and led John to a pair of seats next to Stan and Myra, who were already commencing with their final pre-travel ritual—one last Wet Wipe shower before takeoff to wash the red African clay from their skin so they would emerge in Belgium smelling lemony fresh.

John slipped off his decrepit brown flip flops and started swiping his feet with the wipes Lauren took from her pack. He dropped the filthy rag into their throwaway pile on the floor and slipped another wipe from the pack to get to work on his shins.

His wound began pulsing again. The bloody circle underneath the cloth bandage had darkened, was almost black. John stopped his disgusting bath and stared at his right palm. He pushed on its center with his index finger.

Nothing.

Well, not *nothing*, exactly—this absence of pain was something, after all. He hadn’t told Lauren about the fork, obviously, but he also hadn’t told her that he couldn’t feel much sensation in his right hand besides the ends of his fingers. That whatever pain he felt was crawling up his wrist. That the only times he noticed his hand, now, was when the wound was pulsing, calling out to him.

That his wound pulsed.

He pressed three fingers into the center of his wounded palm. Nothing. It occurred to John that he could press further into his hand and tear out the ruined flesh inside,

ripping strand after strand out and onto the floor until he could find the diseased, rotting core of his palm and then rip *that* out and hold the blackened lump aloft so that Lauren and Myra and Stan and John could see the root of the issue, that he wasn't cursed, that there's no such thing as blood curses, that he wasn't going to rot away on this continent and he was going to be okay, just like the rest of the Joneses. No to worry.

"Baby, what's wrong?" Lauren asked.

John seemed to be locked in a trance while pressing down on his wound.

She grabbed his left wrist. "Hey!"

John snapped out of it. "What? Sorry."

"It's okay. What happened?" Lauren cupped the back of John's head. "You looked lost all of a sudden."

"I...I don't know. I guess I was just thinking."

Stan and Myra were giving him concerned looks.

"I'm okay," John said.

"Here," Lauren said, taking the wipe from his hand. She finished cleaning his shins and the backs of his legs, then took the socks and running shoes he'd kept aside for their trip home out of his bag. Kneeling on the tile, she unrolled the socks and slipped them onto his feet, followed by his Asics. She tied her laces differently than John did so they felt looser on his feet, like he'd been wearing them all day, but he didn't care. Back home, a bath like this would've left John feeling dirtier, somehow, the grime not totally removed but spread into a thinner layer on his skin, the grit wetted and sticking to the

backs of knees. He was experiencing that same sensation now, too, yet he'd never felt so clean in his whole life.

He smiled down at Lauren. "This take you back to your Foot Locker days?"

"One can dream." She picked up his sandals and got up off the floor. She grabbed her bag and motioned at Myra, who stood. They started walking away.

"Where are you going?" John asked. His voice sounded weak, whining.

"We're just going to the bathroom to change, baby."

"What are you doing with those?"

Lauren looked at the pair of flip-flops in her hand. "I'm going to see if the attendant wants them. We were just going to trash them, anyway."

John nodded—they'd given away some of their clothes to native West Africans throughout the trip, including that very morning in Togoville—Jesus, had that all happened in the same day?—so why not one last time at the airport?

"Attendant?" he asked.

"Yeah, over by the bathroom."

John leaned back in his chair and swiveled his head. The bathroom alcove contained an opening that led to a split hallway feeding into each separate bathroom. There was a counter across from the opening. An older, skinny, Arabian-looking man with a long beard sat cross-legged on the counter handing individual paper towels and squares of toilet paper to incoming travelers.

John turned back to Lauren. "Fancy word."

Lauren stared up at the ceiling. “Fine, the toilet paper guard over there. *That* dude. I’ll let you know if he’s carrying a machine gun.”

The attendant/toilet paper guard smiled and accepted the sandals from Lauren, then handed the two ladies a square of toilet paper each before they stepped into the left bathroom. Stan came over and sat in Lauren’s vacant chair.

“How are you holding up?”

John laughed.

“Can I see your hand?”

John glanced at him. “What, you’re concerned now?”

Stan shrugged. “Maybe I can help. I’m a certified EMT, you know.”

“You’re retired.”

“Yeah, well, I could still doctor a wound that needs doctoring.”

“When’s the last time you did anything besides pull a splinter out with tweezers?”

“Just give it here.” Stan grabbed John’s right wrist and flipped his hand over, cradling it in his own. “Doesn’t look good.”

“You think?”

Stan traced the outer edge of the wound like John had done twenty times that day.

“Something’s not right about this. Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Yeah, there *is*. Puncture wounds don’t just randomly quadruple in diameter in a few hours.”

“Then how would I know anything about it? Shit, Stan, you’re acting like this is some kind of covert operation.” He tore his hand from Stan’s grip. “I’m just sick, alright?”

Stan’s expression softened. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then: “You’re really important to my little girl. I can’t just sit and let something happen to you.” He held out his hands and looked up at John.

John nodded and placed his wounded hand in Stan’s again. Stan pressed on the sides of John’s palm, at the edges of the wound.

“Does that hurt?”

John shook his head.

Stan kept pressing, but John was only aware of that because he watched him do it—he didn’t register any of the pressure issuing from Stan’s stubby fingertips.

“What does it feel like?” his father-in-law asked.

“It feels like it should hurt.”

Stan looked John in the eye. “How bad is it, really?”

John licked his lips and made a tight smile. “Bad.”

Stan nodded, gave John a hard clap on the shoulder. He leaned in closer. “Let’s just hang in there till Brussels. I’ll stay with you—

The lemon scent clinging to Stan’s neck and cheeks filled John’s nostrils and gathered at the back of his throat. John’s stomach rumbled and clenched, and he doubled over in his seat.

Stan leaned in closer, making it worse. “What is it?”

John bent over further to get away from the smell, but then caught a whiff of the same scent wafting up from his legs. He didn’t understand what was happening—this smell had never made him feel sick before, and it had hung in the air all around them just a few minutes ago when they were wiping down. He even liked the smell—clean, but not bleached clean. But he didn’t right then.

He staggered to his feet but doubled over again, holding his stomach. Stan leaped out of his chair and lifted John’s left arm over his head, bracing him around the waist. John strained his head to right, away from Stan’s neck. He was shivering. They walked to the bathroom this way, Stan nearly carrying John the final few steps. They refused the paper towel offered by the attendant, and the state of the hallway leading to the bathroom’s floor made John cringe about what awaited him further inside.

The bathroom consisted of a small, dimly lit room with two sinks and mirrors on its right wall and a pair of toilets sitting in individual closets at its end. The two toilets were isolated from each other but not from the rest of the room—there was no door or curtain or force field of any kind. Not that John really cared at that point.

He and Stan had stopped in the middle of the bathroom. John glanced at the mirror to his right and saw how pale he was, how much color had drained from his face in the past few hours, how he was shaking visibly in a cold sweat.

The first toilet was occupied by a dark-skinned man in a dashiki pulled up around his waist. He looked up at them and then went back to the book he was holding.

The second toilet had been recently occupied.

It was in the worst state of filth John had ever seen, a considerable fact since he'd survived the dorms in college. It was unimaginable, unapproachable. It was the "worst toilet in Scotland" from *Trainspotting*.

There would be no hugging of this monster.

John leaned into the toilet room and braced himself against the orange-faded-to-pink tile walls with both arms. In this fashion he suspended himself over the toilet just before his stomach gave the old heave-ho. Stan stepped up and held his waist.

John's body convulsed as the two cans of Sprite made their way through the exit and into the slop below. He closed his eyes after the first splash, the various messes amalgamating in the decidedly less-than-pristine bowl, so he didn't see the bile coming out of him afterward.

"That's it," Stan said, patting his back. "It's okay. It's almost over."

John shuddered one last time and then spit into the darkness, unsure of his aim. He and Stan backed out of the closet and into the bathroom, where he could sense a line of impatient travelers forming. The man on the other toilet hadn't moved at all.

Three West Africans stood between them and the doorway in single file, carrying solitary paper towels and wearing looks of alarm.

John looked down at the napkins in their hands and remembered they didn't take any. He handed Stan his cap and then struggled out of his sweaty red t-shirt, wiping the remaining mess from his mouth with it. He glanced at the ruined toilet and then back at the line of men watching him with stunned expressions.

"Next?"

Chapter Six

Typically, John wasn't rude to foreigners. He'd at least stop and say *bonjour*, *bon soir*, *ça va*, whichever greeting seemed appropriate or, most likely, popped up in his mind first. He'd introduce himself, *Je m'appelle John, comment t'appelles-tu?* He'd repeat whatever name the foreigner muttered in return.

Well, technically, he was the foreigner in the equation for the next sixteen hours until their second flight touched down in Newark.

If he survived that long.

But the Arabian-looking man with a long beard squatting in a bathroom alcove, handing out individual plies of TP or paper towels and accepting danky flip-flops was the most foreign thing John had ever seen. Plus, John had just emptied himself into a portal to Hell and was still feeling a bit under the weather, to put it mildly—like the rider on the pale horse, really—so he deserved a bit of latitude when, exiting the bathroom, he tossed his red t-shirt soiled with sweat and basement dirt and vomit remnants in the direction of the man sitting on the counter without so much as looking him in the eye.

To John's credit, the man snatched the shirt out of the air at its apex as if there were other suitors for the prize, a throng of bridesmaids clawing for this tawdry bouquet. He flashed a toothless smile and made a slight bow while clutching the t-shirt against his chest—this was a man who bore no ill will to any giver over the manner of his giving, who'd left all mouths of gift horses unexamined.

To John's discredit, he couldn't have given two shits, and didn't see this display of thanks, anyway.

Stan promenaded John back to their seats in the anteroom, where Lauren and Myra were waiting.

“What *happened*?” Myra asked.

“He got sick again,” Stan said, still holding onto John. “But he’s okay now.”

Lauren placed her hand on John’s forehead. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” John said.

“You feel really hot.”

“Well...” John trailed off. He shrugged. What else was there to say? He knew he looked like shit. But he was tired of saying he was fine, that he was okay. He was tired of answering everyone’s questions. He was tired of lying.

But he couldn’t tell them the truth. If he even believed it himself.

Lauren smiled thinly. “I just don’t know.” She looked into John’s eyes and saw the resignation there. She sighed.

“Nice shirt.”

John was wearing the black t-shirt he’d bought before the trip and had been saving in his pack for the flights home. It displayed the African continent in red, the caption reading “A-Frican Love This Place.” Stan had helped him into it after trading his wraparound shades for a paper towel to wipe the sweat from John’s back and armpits.

John grimaced and held his stomach. “Yeah, but it has a typo,” he said, pointing to the word *Love*.

Lauren straightened the shirt on his shoulders. “Still, it looks good on you.” She smiled. “Makes you look slim.”

John laughed. “Whatever. Let’s head to the gate.”

“Yeah, about that...” Lauren turned and pointed to the thirty-deep line waiting to file through to the adjacent room.

“Jesus.” John grabbed his bag and shuffled into the queue. They waited for ten minutes but only moved up two spots in line.

Myra pressed her denim visor against her hair poof once more. “Honey, could you see what’s happening up there?”

“Probably another one of Stan’s much-appreciated security checkpoints,” John said.

“My ass,” Stan said.

“I’d bet you, but I’ll probably need my last few céfa to get through.”

Stan placed his backpack on the ground next to his luggage. “You’re on. Don’t worry, I got enough of that monopoly money to cover both of our bets.” He stepped out of line and walked to where the line bent around the corner.

John shivered. His stomach lurched again, but he didn’t think he’d be sick this time. He wasn’t venturing away from the queue if he did, anyway. But still, he had a sinking feeling that there was going to be another delay of some kind. He looked out through the glass at the tarmac. The surrounding jungle seemed to have moved a few feet during the past half hour, encroaching over the border onto the pavement. Another few hours and it would suffocate them.

Stan returned. He looked at the other three members of the party and shook his head, then took a seat at the adjacent bar.

“Dewar’s,” he said to the African bartender. When the man didn’t move, Stan added “S’il vous plaît” with a flick of his wrist.

“So, more armed guards?” John asked.

Stan took a belt of scotch. “Let’s just say drinks are on me.”

After six fingers of scotch—Stan’s second drink order earned him raised eyebrows from Myra—the group made it to the bend in the queue, where they saw what the hold-up was: an airline clerk was verifying boarding passes while a security guard searched through purses and carry-ons and the various effects from the passengers’ pockets. Another guard brandishing a sub-machine gun surveyed these proceedings and the line of people waiting to be searched.

“Thorough enough for you?” John asked Stan.

Stan smirked. “Save it, Sickboy.”

When it was John’s turn he handed his boarding pass to the Brussels Air clerk, another stunning tan-skinned woman with long, dark hair, and then dumped his phone and keys and gum and meager cache of céfa in front of the guard. He poked around John’s things, examined his keys inquisitively. John thought he detected the guard with the gun shift his weight.

“Why didn’t you stick all that in your bag?” Lauren whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“Because you’re not going to need your keys on the plane.”

“What if the pilot needs me to drive?”

“Or your gum. Just stick it all in your bag.”

John thought about what transpired in the airport bathroom a half hour ago. “Trust me, you’re going to want me to hold onto that gum.”

“Okay, okay.” Lauren scratched his back. “One less thing to—I was just—
“I know.”

The guard had watched their brief interaction but seemed to have decided that John’s keys didn’t pose a serious threat to the flight crew. But still, there was something—he narrowed his eyes at John and moved from his seat behind the table to get a closer look at him.

John’s wound pulsed beneath its bandage. He secreted his hand behind his right leg and closed it into a fist.

He didn’t need to look down to know it was bleeding again. Or that it threatened to consume his entire palm. He started sweating.

The man stood inches from John’s face and pawed at his shoulders and chest. John could smell the unwashed odor of his beard, two days of perpetual sweat with a touch of dirt. He smelled alcohol and fish on the man’s breath, the sharp tang of yesterday’s liquor emanating from his pores. He swore he could hear the man’s blood whooshing through the vessels in his neck.

John’s stomach grumbled.

The man heard the sound and said something in Ewe, laughing. He patted the sides of John’s torso and crouched slightly to frisk his legs.

The wound pulsed steadily inside John’s clenched fist. Could the man hear it? Was it calling to him from behind John’s leg? John felt weak, like the wound was

gathering all of his energy into itself. Sweat slid down his spine and prickled his bare ass beneath his shorts—he hadn't thought to change into a fresh pair of boxers after abandoning his previous, unfortunate set on the side of the restaurant. A sudden, immense ache slammed through his head. His pulse quickened, making his body feel overheated.

His right hand slackened.

John felt a deep urge to knee the guard in the face, *hard*, exploding his nose with a crunch and spray of blood and then snatch him by the lapels when he was skittering backward on his heels, hoist and slam his limp, shocked body onto the table, John's inconsequential keys digging into his back. From there he'd pounce onto the man's chest and begin disassembling the other features of his face: scrabbling at his eyes, clawing strips of flesh from his cheeks, tearing out his mandible with its row of crooked yellow teeth and stinking beard and tossing it onto the table with the rest of John's effects—because it belonged to *him*, now—clearing a path to get at the man's throat and see and feel (and taste) the blood John knew was screaming through the veins and arteries entwined there, all those vessels that needed untangling.

The fingers of John's right hand flexed.

He licked his lips.

The man stood abruptly. "Allez."

John shook his head. The pulsing in his hand stopped. "Huh?"

The guard widened his eyes at him. "*Monsieur*," he said, gesturing to the chairs outside their gate, "allez."

"Wake up there, Johnny," Stan said from behind Myra.

“Oh, sorry,” John said. He looked down at his palm. The blood had receded back into the wound.

“It’s okay, baby,” Lauren said. “Get your stuff.”

The guard that frisked John returned to his seat behind the table. John reached down and slipped his belongings back into his Lomé Airport-secure pockets. He imagined picking the guard’s jawbone up from the table and smiled to himself. John chuckled and glanced up at the other guard looming over the proceedings with his machine gun.

He was not similarly amused.

John wheeled his bag over to one of the rows of chairs waiting by the gate, slung his backpack to the ground, and plopped into a seat. The chair reminded him of those he’d encountered in Dallas while visiting churches with Lauren, churches whose bodies considered themselves too contemporary for traditional pews and opted instead for rows of interlocked metal chairs with blue or purple or green-carpeted upholstery—a postmodern way of making people feel uncomfortable.

Why had he thought about mauling that security guard? And his detached jawbone afterward?

Why had he *enjoyed* it?

John was tired of lying about how he was feeling, yeah, about what he’d seen, about what was happening to him, but now he was thinking he *shouldn’t*—that maybe what was happening was bigger than all of them. Maybe it was in their best interest to know everything, if they could believe it.

He looked down at the dark spot beneath his bandage. He felt a dull ache in his forearm. Maybe he believed it.

A burp barreled up John's esophagus and caught in his throat. He belched into his fist. It was one of those that tasted like vomit—a sensation John felt like he could write a book on, now. He fished a piece of peppermint gum from the pack in his pocket, glanced around for a trash can for a few seconds before tossing the wrapper onto the floor. Before replacing the pack in his pocket, he took his wallet and keys out of his shorts and zipped them into a front compartment of his backpack.

Lauren was right: he wouldn't be needing them on the plane.

* * *

John found himself drowned in that nightmarish scarlet body of water again. Thrashing in it. He tore everything living there asunder. If this one had parted, too, revealing a line of Israelites schlepping through the silt, John would've done them in same as the rest. His primal screams bubbled through the red murk. But something tugged at him, sent him rushing upward until his face broke the surface.

Lauren shook him awake. "Babe? It's time."

John inhaled deeply, gulping air. His heart raced, and his eyes darted around the airport lobby. After a few seconds he could focus on Lauren's red cap, the white *T* sewn into it, her pretty, concerned face beneath it.

"I'm okay," John said. "Just had a weird dream."

She nodded, extending a hand to him.

John took it with his left, let her pull him up the final eighty percent of the way after he'd taken care of the first twenty.

"We're finally leaving," she said.

"Super."

Myra's hair poof appeared behind Lauren's head. "How's the patient?" she asked, leaning over Lauren's shoulder.

"Super," John said.

Lauren felt his forehead for the thousandth time. He was hot, he was cold—Jesus, what did it matter? He was always shivering, anyway.

"I think he'll improve a bit with some rest on the plane," she said.

"Maybe with some brown liquor, too," Stan said.

"God, that's the last thing I want."

"You neither, Stanley," Myra said, nudging her husband.

"Alright," Stan said, "let's get out of here."

John and the Joneses filed into the line of passengers making their way out of the gate and into the twilight heat. Once John got onto the tarmac he was struck by how quiet everything was—he'd cycled through airports like this one before—well, not *exactly* like this one, obviously—that fed passengers out onto the tarmac before they were herded up a ramp into their plane, and there was always tons of noisy activity going on outside.

Like that long red-headed stepchild of a terminal in Denver. He'd been flying Southwest back to Dallas at the end of a business trip and discovered that he had to wait in line outside before boarding the plane. Which would've been fine, except it was late-

February. And there was an old lady at the head of the line who wanted to argue about the overhead-storage-ability of her non-carry-on carry-on, and testify to her ability to wait in the cold until a TSA agent was summoned forth to inform her that her bag was, indeed, too large to be stored and must be checked. Luckily, it hadn't come to that. John had thought that the TSA didn't mess with that kind of stuff, anyway. Probably because they would've just screwed it up.

During that wait in the Colorado winter-evening air he had to block out the humming motors of passing baggage carts, the thuds of luggage slamming onto conveyor belts, the booming engines of planes tearing away from the runway, and the whistling, biting crosswinds and strain his neck to hear just what, exactly, the wrinkled cooze could *possibly* be bitching about at that very moment.

However, just outside of Gate 4 in Lomé, Togo, John could hear stars burning.

And Lauren, behind him, could hear his stomach lurch.

She leaned into him. "Are you okay?"

He wasn't. The spike in humidity after passing through the gate gripped John's lungs like back in the slave house basement. Sweat poured down his back and ringed his collarbone. His wound pulsed rapidly, breathing in the night air of its homeland one last time before venturing into the recycled air of the plane. Breathing, maybe, because John couldn't at that moment. He felt like he might not ever again.

Then they came, three heaving inhalations, followed immediately by John careening to his right and spewing a tight little stream onto the tarmac. The resulting miniature puddle appeared black, but it was too dark to make out its true color. Seeing as

he'd sent the last of the Sprite to Hell about a half hour ago, John hoped that it was bile he'd just expelled onto the ground.

But, honestly, he suspected otherwise.

Blood.

Lauren put her arm around him. "Ugh," she said, "I'm so sorry."

John wanted to buck her arm off his back—he was tired of all of this patting and petting and concern and what the fuck was *she* so sorry about, anyway? She didn't know about half the shit that happened that day: the bullshit idol, the fork in his palm, the airport cesspool, the piece of shit guides masquerading as friends. She didn't know because she hadn't been there. At his side. She could be sorry about *that*.

He couldn't buck her arm off, though. The only movement his body seemed capable of was shaking, shivering in the ninety-degree/ninety-percent humidity air. Lauren took this opportunity to briskly rub his arms to warm him up.

"What's going on?" Myra asked.

"What do you think?" Lauren said. "He's burning alive out here, so he can't stop shaking."

"Mercy," Myra said.

John didn't even try to say that he was okay. And he was warming up to the idea of mercy—he wondered if there would be any for him in the end.

The line of passengers began walking toward the plane now that the stairs were in place on the tarmac. John's backpack had slumped off his shoulders and onto the pavement when he'd keeled over. Instinctively, he bent to pick it up with his right hand.

Nothing happened. He couldn't bend his fingers to grip the shoulder strap, like they weren't receiving the message from his brain. Like the network of nerves bundled in his carpals and channeled into his metacarpals had been cut off at the wrist.

"What's wrong?" Lauren asked. Jesus, what a dumb question.

John turned his head to her. "Oh, absolutely *nothing*, baby."

The passengers behind them began filing past, giving them a wide berth. John figured some of them would've typically stuck around to gawk at this spectacle, but they all seemed as bent on stepping off this festering open sore of a continent as him. Including Stan.

"Where are you going?" Myra asked.

"Where do you think?" Stan said, walking backward. "What, you want to stay an extra night at the airport Super 8?"

"No, I mean we can't just—

"Mosquito-nets not included."

"*Stanley*. We can't just leave them out here and get on the plane."

"Are we going to carry him? I know the poor boy's sick but I think his legs still work."

John laughed. Myra didn't say anything. Neither did Lauren—the women's glares said more than enough. John bet that Stan had seen those two looks in unison numerous times during the past twenty-five years. They meant *Stop. Listen. Do this. Now. Because you'll regret doing otherwise.*

Stan stopped. And listened. And did otherwise.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right. I was just—

“I know,” John said. “It’s okay.”

Stan scooped up John’s backpack and shouldered it alongside his. “What about your carry-on?”

“I can take it,” Lauren said. John remained hunched over, her hand clenching his shoulder.

“Okay,” Stan said, trying not to walk away. “Are we good? I mean, do you think you’ll be able to make it on?”

“I’ll manage,” John said.

“Okay, we’ll be right ahead of you.” Stan and Myra let a handful of families pass before stepping back in line.

“Lauren, let me see your phone,” John said.

“My phone?”

“Yeah, I need a light.” The only lights outside their gate were the distant white lights of the plane and the same dim amber ones that dotted the outside of the terminal.

“Okay.” Lauren dug her smartphone from her purse and switched on its flashlight app. She handed it to John.

John remained hunched over and examined his right palm under the light, holding it away from Lauren. His wound looked black underneath the bandage, so no change there. And it had stopped pulsing, at least for the time being. Maybe it had gotten its fill of the thick Togolese atmosphere. But that wasn’t what concerned John at that point—his

unresponsive fingers had darkened to a colorless grey. He willed them to grip, twitch, *anything*, executing that seemingly involuntary command with his pounding head.

Would it help to imagine tearing that guard's jaw out again?

No. Nothing.

His fingers remained where they were, stiff, grey. John hoped that their appearance was just a result of the light contrasting with the darkness.

"Well?" Lauren asked. "What do you see?"

"Nothing." He wasn't as tired of lying as he thought. But it was for her own good—what could anybody do besides get on the plane?

"Nothing at all."

"Well, there's always something." John shut off the app, plunging his hand back into darkness, and handed the phone back to Lauren. "But nothing new to report." He felt a pang of guilt.

"Okay." She slipped the phone back into her purse. "Don't worry about the bags, I'll be fine," she said before John could ask.

John nodded and wobbled to his feet. His head swam like he'd had a few belts of Imperial at Stan's waterhole by their gate. That was probably the only vodka they had in this God-forsaken place. Their premium.

His fever was back with a vengeance. He didn't know what was going on with the rest of his body but he knew that miserable feeling well enough.

"I think I can make it," he said, but his voice shook.

Lauren stood grasping the extended handles of both bags and positioned herself so John could lean against her every step to the plane.

“I’m here, baby. But be careful.” she said. “We can go as slow as we need to. The plane isn’t going anywhere.”

John tried one careful step, two steps, but then he was that rock skimming over a pond again, lingering after its last jump and then plunging downward into only black depths now, down, down, down.

“Dad!” Lauren yelled, letting the bags fall to the pavement.

John was on his way to the ground, but Stan had been watching. Stan had *seen*, before it had even happened. He swooped through the passengers-turned-spectators who instinctively parted for his bulk and caught John before he could crack open on the tarmac, both backpacks still in tow, a seasoned fireman who’d never really retired from duty, adept at shouldering more than his share of dead weight.

* * *

John hadn’t faded to black when Stan rescued him from his fall and began carrying him to the stairs. Not at all, actually—his legs had just flat given out. Refused to walk. He saw the pavement rushing up to meet him and then he was floating, Lauren crying and grabbing his hand as he was being pulled away from her.

He couldn’t believe how strong Stan was. He’d underestimated him.

But an alarm was going off in his weary mind, something unrelated to everything that was happening to him.

Where were they going? The stairs. No, not just there. The plane. Stan was going to carry him onto the plane. And John didn't believe that a tightly run organization like Brussels Air would let someone who was carried onto the plane like a passed-out drunk remain onboard.

John gathered his remaining strength and began wiggling his legs. "Wait," he moaned. "Wait."

Stan stopped, but didn't set him down. "Wait for what?"

"Just put me down."

"It's okay, I can get you up the stairs."

"Please."

Lauren wiped her eyes and helped brace John as Stan set him down. "What is it?"

John grabbed his knees and sucked in some air. He straightened up, trying to exhale slowly and steady his heart's panicked beating.

"They're not going to let me on if we go this way."

"How do you know?" Myra said.

"I just do."

"But what if you can't make it up the steps?" Lauren asked. "They're pretty steep."

John looked toward the stairs and then up at the plane. When they'd boarded their plane in Newark it'd been via jet way—a commercial airline practice not yet embraced in Denver or West Africa—so he hadn't noticed the size of the aircraft that spirited them across the Atlantic. When he'd stepped onto the shuttle in Abidjan he hadn't thought to

look back at the plane he'd just climbed down from. But now he had a chance to take in the size of this vessel, and it was fucking *immense*—the rounded nose of the cockpit seemed to stand thirty feet off the ground. The landing gear tires had been ripped off a monster truck somewhere in backwoods North Carolina. The two jet engines weighing down each wing threatened to suck the passengers climbing the stairs through their turbines. And the fuselage looked to be constructed of ten of those American puddle-jumpers he'd squeeze into in Dallas.

Oh, and there was a second deck stacked on top of the first one. Jesus. John bet their seats were up that second flight of stairs.

He shifted his gaze back to the stairs outside the plane and pointed. The rest of the group looked back. Two attendants in bright orange vests—not at all like the hygiene vendor squatting in the bathroom alcove—were watching the events on the tarmac intently. The other vest-wearing attendant seemed to be inspecting the oncoming passengers in the white glow of the cockpit before admitting them onboard.

Stan turned back to face John. “So what? We paid for our tickets fair and square.”

“I don't think that's the issue, Hun,” Myra said.

“And we're Americans.”

“I think it would help more if we were Belgian,” John said.

“To hell with *that*.”

“He's right, Dad.” Lauren grabbed John's hand. “Do you think you can do it?”

“I don't think I really have a choice.”

“Well...okay, I guess,” Stan said. “Let's get going before they get any ideas.”

“Too late for that,” John said. The other three grabbed the bags and formed a phalanx alongside John, taking care to stay close without holding him up. John tried to will his body to move like before, and this time, miraculously, it worked. He began hobbling toward the stair ramp one careful step at a time.

John tensed up when their battle formation arrived at the foot of the stairs a few minutes later. Their steps were wide enough, and made of corrugated steel like those of an escalator or bus that John had climbed countless times before. But they stretched upward at a sixty-plus degree angle.

He grasped at the railing with his wounded right hand by instinct. Its grey fingers gripped the clammy metal and froze there. His right forearm constricted, engorging the dying veins that slithered through its cords of muscle. His back stiffened.

Why didn't he want to go? He'd been waiting for this moment the entire day, for the past three days, maybe even since he'd stepped off the plane in Abidjan. Climbing aboard this modern albatross had been the beacon at the end of the muggy, muddy, smelly tunnel of their tour of West Africa, a light that would sweep him away to a magical world devoid of mystery meat, rust-tinged bags of water, and sleeping on top of the sheets.

John willed his right leg to mount the first step and his hand tightened against the rail, keeping him from moving to the next one. Stan bumped into him and dropped the bags onto the ground.

“Should I book that Super 8?” Stan said.

“What?”

“One foot and then the other, Johnny.”

“It’s okay, baby,” Lauren said, standing next to John on the first step. “You can take your time.”

John looked past Stan to the sweltering jungle enshrouding the tarmac. A breeze shook its limbs and palm fronds. Was it waving to him? Beckoning?

His wound pulsed.

“*John,*” Stan said.

John blinked and looked down at him. Stan nodded in the direction of the plane.

“We’re right behind you,” Myra said. John hoped that if he fell backward he would at least knock that obnoxious denim visor off her hair poof.

“Babe?” Lauren said when John didn’t move.

“I can do it,” he said. He squinted into the white lights at the top of the stairs. “Do you think they’ve got a rope they could throw down to me?”

He willed his right hand to pry itself from the rail and trudged up the steps one at a time like Stan said, his right arm dangling lifeless by his side.

His wound left behind a sticky smudge of blood.

* * *

The orange vests turned out to not be a problem at all. Once John and Lauren and the Joneses cleared the final step of the ramp after a careful two-minute ascension—John took pains to keep his right hand away from the rail because it felt strangely drawn to it like a magnet, and not having the rail for the support coupled with the necessity of climbing the stairs without the help of his family made for slow going—the two

attendants cast a quick glance at their boarding passes before waving them onboard and instructing them to head to the second deck.

John wasn't sure if their lack of concern was due to him stuffing his wounded hand in his pocket at the top of the outdoor stairs—and if that was the case, they also weren't too concerned with John's cringing face, neither—their trust in the *Scarface*-level diligence of Lomé Airport security, or the fact that all four members of their party were white.

Whichever reason it was, John didn't care because they were on the plane. Though it had probably been the last one.

The plane was just as immense on the inside as it was on the outside: in coach, twin rows of three blue leather seats flanked a row of five seats that stretched across the middle of the cabin, each seat replete with a touchscreen monitor and only slightly inadequate legroom.

The foursome plodded up the plane's thick plastic stairs in an alcove just off of first class. Soft blue light hazed from beneath each stair. John's legs shook with the effort and he pawed at the aluminum railing with his left hand. A chain of long and thin white halogen lamps lit the sides of the stairwell and looped up to ceiling of the top deck's entrance. It reminded John of the electronic ring of ads that circled the American Airlines Center back in Dallas.

At the top of the steps, two flight attendants in navy uniforms, orange ascots, and chopsticked buns directed passengers to the right or left with curt nods like horses cutting calves. The second floor cabin was smaller than the one below, but, with a two-four-two

seat alignment, still pretty damn big. The attendants instructed John and Lauren to find their seats to the right, in the rear of the aircraft, while they sent Stan and Myra to the left. The group lingered in the middle of the cabin.

“Wait, we’re not sitting together?” Lauren asked.

“Apparently not,” Stan said.

“Why didn’t you book them together?” Myra asked. “We’ve been in the same row every other time.”

“Look, I just took what they gave me.” The remaining passengers not yet seated began to logjam behind Stan.

“Don’t you get to pick your seats on the website?”

“Yeah, but there weren’t enough together.” A couple of tall West Africans in yellow and black dashikis bulled their way past John and Lauren and into the rear cabin.

“*Monsieur*,” the brunette flight attendant said.

“Really, Dad? There’s a lot of seats on here.”

“It’s not a big deal, Lauren,” John said. Seriously, what the fuck was her problem? He didn’t really feel like dying on his feet.

“Honey, maybe we could switch seats with someone else,” Myra said.

“I don’t think that’s really a good idea,” Stan said.

“Why not?” Lauren and Myra said in unison. They stared at Stan, waiting for a good answer.

“*Monsieur*,” the flight attendant said again, pointing to the left, “first class is to the front.”

John looked around to make sure the flight attendant hadn't been addressing a different monsieur, perhaps one without raccoon eyes. She hadn't.

"Really?" Myra said.

"*Really?*" Lauren said.

"What?" Stan said. He turned to Myra. "It was a surprise."

"I'm really happy for you," Lauren said. "Don't worry about us, we'll just be in sick bay in steerage."

The brunette flight attendant turned to John. "Are you feeling well, monsieur?" she said, smiling. Her eyes didn't match her mouth's sentiment.

John blinked, didn't respond.

"He's fine," Lauren said. She grabbed John's good hand and lead him into the rear cabin.

"We'll come check on you, dear," Myra said.

"And we'll take care of the extra bags," Stan said.

"You'll definitely have enough room," Lauren said.

"Monsieur, please," the brunette said, nodding toward the front cabin.

"I don't understand what your problem is," Stan said, shouting as John and Lauren slid into the step-pause-step procession in the right aisle. "It was just a surprise."

"It certainly was," Lauren said without turning around.

John couldn't have cared less about the whole thing. Good for Stan and Myra, actually—

might as well escape from this decaying hemorrhoid of a continent in style. He just wanted to get to his seat. Any seat, really—he would’ve happily sat in steerage if their plane offered such accommodations. He would’ve sat in the can with its cold metal lid, weird green chemicals, and initially tolerable smell whose level of tolerability decreased by ten percent every successive ten seconds, the smell of an eighth-grade boy who opts for three clouds of Axe body spray over showering after a particularly strenuous gym class. He would’ve splayed himself on the floor of the galley next to the miniature liquor bottles and half-empty coke cans. He would’ve spooned the landing gear like a fucking koala, if need be.

Luckily, it didn’t come to that—sixteen rows down Lauren stopped dragging John up the aisle and plopped into the window seat on the right. John lowered himself into the seat next to her. He hated the aisle, but he knew that seat was probably best given his up-and-down situation, to put it gently. Excreting everything he had left, to put it bluntly.

Lauren pressed a hand to John’s forehead. Again.

“I know this may be risky, but do you want to try holding down a couple of aspirin?” she said.

“Risky? Like there’s a chance I might spew for the tenth time today?”

“I just meant that we didn’t want to make anything worse.”

“*Worse?* How could two little capsules of Tylenol make any of this worse?”

“Babe, I just—

“Just *what?* Assumed that this bullshit African curse came with liver problems free of charge?”

“Don’t say that,” Lauren said. She started crying.

“Don’t say what?” John swore he’d open her skull up if she said another word, starting with tearing out the blond ponytail peeking from her cap.

“That *word*,” Lauren said. “Please don’t say that. You’re not cursed, you’re going to be okay, we’re going home...” She trailed off and bent over to dig through her pack, her back hiccupping with sobs.

What the hell was happening to him? Since when did he think about hurting his wife? Since when did he just watch her cry like that? Seeing Lauren cry always crushed John, spurred him to action even if her tears were his fault. His inaction broke him this time.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” he said, patting her back. “I don’t know why I snapped at you like that.”

Lauren continued digging and shaking, her back to him.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“It’s not in here,” Lauren said. “I bet my mom packed the medicines in your backpack earlier.” She stood and sidled past John into the aisle.

“Lauren, I—

“It’s okay.” She wiped her reddened eyes. “I know you’ve had a hell of a day. I’ll be right back.” She smiled weakly and hurried toward the front cabin. A huge man wearing a brown jacket and a white cowboy hat tucked his left leg away from the aisle for her. John fucking hated cowboy hats, but seeing another Texan—and he had to be a

Texan: who else would wear a hat like that in this septic tank of a continent?—was assuring, somehow. Familiar. The guy was probably even carrying a gun.

Still, John banged his head against the seat. Fuck this shit. Fuck Jean and Jo-Jo and that psychopath Chaman and all their third-world black magic bullshit. John was on the plane—he'd beaten those sons of bitches. He was going to leave all their smoke and idols and mantras behind him when the landing gear touched off from the runway.

He wasn't going to die. He wasn't going to hurt anybody either, especially not Lauren. He didn't believe any of it. He never had—he'd been dumb enough to let their crazy beliefs scare him, that's all. Well, fuck that. Fuck the fever and the sickness and the dreams and the blood and the pulsing wound.

His wound was pulsing.

John realized he'd never taken his right hand out of its pocket since boarding the plane. He twisted his body to the left and dragged out his hand. The khaki bandage caught on the inside of his pocket and tore away from the wound, the blood-and-skin-caked strips dangling from his palm. John seethed and hissed only out of frustration—the bandage peeling away didn't cause any pain.

But it revealed a horror: John's entire right hand was grey, even the exposed meat below the skin that had sloughed off with the bandage. The wound stretched across the center of his palm, had grown beyond the size of any coin that John could use as a point of reference. Its edges trembled. The blood and gore brimming inside of it was black.

John held his hand in front of his face, transfixed, until he saw Lauren coming back up the aisle from between his fingers. She was toting his backpack in front of her so

that it wouldn't bump into the passengers on either side. He pressed his hand against the side of his leg.

A flight attendant followed behind Lauren holding aloft two bottles of air freshener with airhorn-style nozzles, spraying their contents into the vents above the overhead compartments as she walked. The Brussels Air safety instructions started playing on John's screen in reverse order from those on their arrival flight, in French first instead of English. John figured Stan was up in first class disappointed that he couldn't make the same "The French even surrender in their own plane" joke that he'd made on the flight to the Ivory Coast ten days ago.

"I was right," Lauren said, settling into her seat, "Mom packed the medicine bag in here." She fished out the aspirin and dumped two into John's left hand. He slipped Stan's lukewarm water bottle from the bag's side pocket and washed the pills down, then stashed his pack under the seat in front of him like a good little passenger.

His stomach rumbled.

Jesus. Mercy.

The plane started taxiing toward the runway. John pulled up the Map view that charted their global journey on his screen after the safety video that not even the flight crew paid attention to ended. The screen indicated that, unfortunately, John was still in Africa.

Just eight hours. He believed he could make it for another eight hours. And that was all he believed in.

A massive pain slammed John's head when the plane began speeding toward takeoff. It merged with his climbing fever and horrific visions and persistent nausea to complete John's utter misery, the fourth horseman helping the others finally drag him to the brink.

John bent over and scavenged through his pack for the medicine bag.

"Babe, what is it?" Lauren asked.

He found the aspirin and held it in his left hand, moved his right palm toward the bottle to make the childproof press-turn motion but stopped just short of the cap. He glanced over at Lauren. Would she notice the trouble his limp fingers had with the lid? The new bloody shadow font for the words reading "Press and Turn"?

John turned away from her and nestled the pill bottle in the crook of his right elbow. He squeezed and jammed the cap onto the carpet and grabbed the bottle with his left hand, dumping three capsules into his ghastly right palm without thinking.

Before he could bring his hand up to his mouth, the pills disappeared inside the wound. They were gone without a trace. Absorbed. The fucker *swallowed* the damn things. Its edges trembled afterward.

Was it satisfied?

John couldn't stop staring at his palm. He willed the aspirin to reappear in his hand like when he'd willed his extremities into motion. No such luck.

"Oh my God, John! Your hand!"

He looked over at his wife. Her eyes were alarmed and brimming, just like when he'd fallen to the floor of the van earlier. Unlike that time, though, Lauren didn't have to ask John if he was okay.

A single tear slid down the left side of John's nose. When was the last time he'd cried? Probably when Stan had walked Lauren down the aisle five years ago, John's smile widening with hers, his bottom lip trembling with hers as she stepped toward him. In the rear cabin of their plane ascending from the red African clay, John saw her that way again.

He didn't blink the tears back this time. Lauren clasped his left hand in both of hers.

"I'm scared," he said, breathing heavily.

Lauren bit her lip, held his hand tighter.

John clenched his eyes and jaws and arms as another wave of pain shook through him. This one sent him under, and he slumped against his seat. The plane climbed toward its cruising altitude.

John had long since run out of luck, and now he was almost out of time.

* * *

The blood crushed his lungs in a most delicious way. John no longer needed to pretend that he was "drowning" in some pussy "scarlet body of water"—this was a deluge of blood. The cascade from the elevator in *The Shining*. And after consuming his fill he hadn't been satisfied, so he let the blood stream down the other pipe and begin filling his lungs. They weighed him down, let him settle into the rocky floor.

Stan's face floated nearby. Jean's. Fucking *Chaman's*. John lashed out at them, clawed through them. He tore off Chaman's jaw and laughed, the blood swallowing the air bubbling up from his mouth and nose.

Which meant more in his lungs, which felt wonderful. Warm.

Something tugged at him. Something tried to fucking lift him off the floor.

John darted around and spied Lauren and Myra's faces. But they weren't just floating there—they were reaching for him, pulling at his arms and legs. He had to make them understand he wasn't leaving this time. That he wanted to be completely filled.

He lashed out at them but nothing happened. They kept tugging at him. He tried again but couldn't even reach them anymore—oh God, he was floating away from the floor. Fucking *air* was filling his lungs. John twisted around to try and make his way back to the bottom but couldn't tell which direction it was in. He thrashed about in the blood, tried to push his body downward but he kept floating toward the surface.

Maybe the air felt good, too. Better.

John came to on his back and squinted from the brightness. He was lying on a cold tile surface. Lauren and Myra's faces floated above him. Lauren had lost her hat since he'd been out. Regrettably, Myra hadn't.

"Where am I?" John asked.

"We're in the galley," Lauren said, holding his hand. "You started shaking in your sleep so a couple workers helped me lay you down in here until you could move back to your seat."

"Shaking?"

“Violently,” Myra said. “I’m glad they came and got me when they did.”

John glanced down at his palm. The khaki bandage had been rewrapped around his wound, with Lauren’s hair tie holding the strips in place. John reached up and touched her blond hair at her shoulders.

“I’m glad you let your hair down.”

Lauren smiled and looked away.

John tried to sit up but could only manage a half-crunch. They were in the back of the plane, the rows and rows of nodding heads stretching out before him. The cabin lights had been dimmed but the galley was filled with white light. He glanced down at his black t-shirt. His chest was spotted with dark, sticky circles.

“Where are we?” John said.

“We’re in the gal-lee,” Myra said slowly.

“He doesn’t have Alzheimer’s, Mom. I think he wants to know how far we’ve gone.” Lauren looked down at John, still holding his hand. “We’ve been in the air for a couple of hours now.”

“Where...” John trailed off.

“Mom, could you go to my seat and look at the map?”

Myra stood and left the galley.

“What happened to my shirt?”

“You threw up a bit in your sleep,” Lauren said, “but it wasn’t much. Not like before.”

John laid back down. “What did you tell them?”

“Who?”

“The stewardesses.”

“I just told them you were sick and had taken too many aspirin.”

“And they didn’t try to ground us? Just look at me.”

“We’ve only been back here for ten minutes or so. I told them this wouldn’t take long.”

John nodded. “Good.” He looked up at the metal ceiling, breathing slowly. Lauren held John’s good hand against her chest.

“What color was it?” John asked.

“What color was what?”

“The vomit.”

“Oh, that. It was black. I think it was bile.” Lauren caressed his hair—apparently he’d lost his hat, too. “But it wasn’t that much. You kind of spit it up.”

John closed his eyes. It wasn’t bile—it was what he’d wanted.

“John?”

He opened his eyes. Lauren was leaning over him. She was crying.

“I’m sorry that we—” Her voice caught in her throat. “I’m sorry that we didn’t—”

“It’s okay.”

“I know you wanted to but it was just so damn hot here and I didn’t know that, that it would be—I just didn’t know.” She started crying louder.

“Hey, hey,” John said. He willed himself to complete a full sit-up so he could hold his wife. “I know. It’s okay. We don’t know anything for sure yet.” But he did.

Lauren sniffled against his shoulder, nodded.

Myra came back into the galley. “We’re somewhere over the Sahara. I couldn’t tell exactly because there aren’t any cities anywhere near us.”

John closed his eyes and grimaced. Would he ever make it out of this steaming abortion of a continent alive?

Intense pain lightnined down his spinal cord, twisting his body away from Lauren’s arms and back to the floor. He cried out. Lauren scooted behind John and cradled his head in her lap.

“John! John! What’s happening?”

Every muscle in John’s sweating body constricted and spasmed, making him flop on the galley floor like a dying fish. He tried to open his eyes so he could see Lauren’s face, but his nerves wouldn’t oblige.

“Please,” he said.

“Oh my God, we need a doctor!” Lauren said. “Mom, go find one!”

“Here?”

“Please!”

“But what if it’s one of those shammin guys again?”

“Mom, just—please.” Lauren sniffled and draped herself over John to try and hold him still. “He feels so cold.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus,” Myra said. She was probably clutching that damn visor.

“Please,” John said, “don’t let me fall asleep again. I don’t want to go back there.”

“Don’t go, baby,” Lauren said. “Don’t go don’t go don’t go.”

But he went.

The vision took him again, down, down, down to the John-shaped spot on the rocky floor he'd been snatched from so rudely. The blood sustained him again and then he began to take its sweetness into his lungs. He let them fill, let the blood displace everything else inside him so that he'd be crushed against the rocky floor. He could finally rest, here. There was only warmth, no cold or pain or sickness or cursed red clay. Just blood. Mercy. He became one with it.

John opened his eyes. His mouth hung open.

"Babe?" Lauren said, holding John's face. "John? It's me."

"Oh, thank you thank you thank you," Myra said.

"God," Lauren said, smiling and crying with relief. "I thought I'd lost you."

John smiled, ran his wounded hand through Lauren's hair and pulled her close. His jaws latched onto her throat and tore away a chunk of flesh, swallowing her scream before it could escape the galley.