The Names *of* Things

a novel

John Colman Wood

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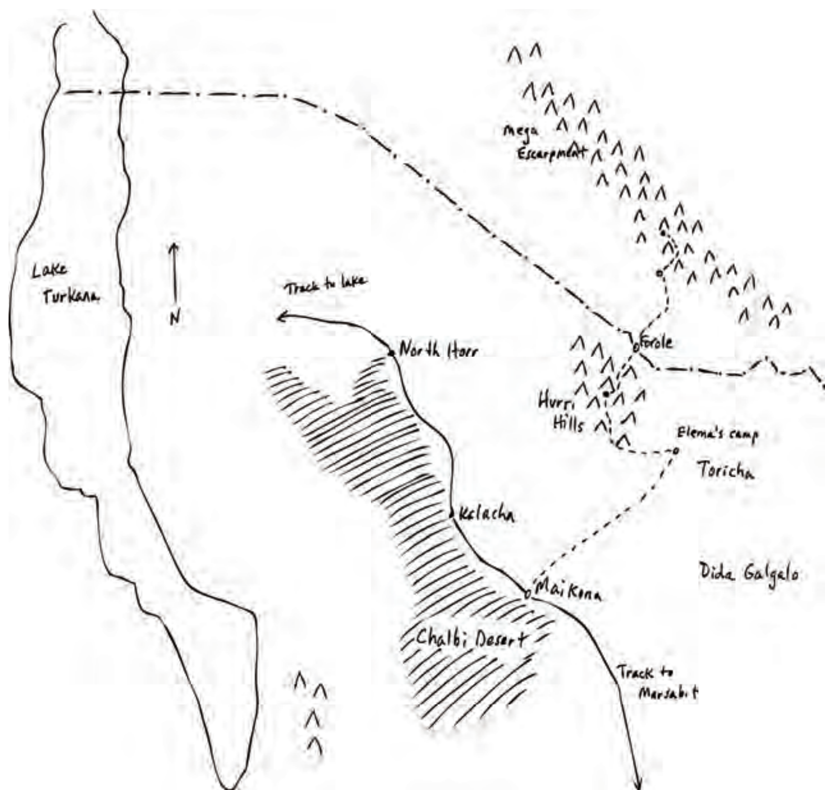

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She hung the canvas on the wall of the studio. I'd seen her start paintings dozens of times, but for some reason—perhaps because of how things turned out—this one has stayed with me. The canvas was square, a little taller and wider than her reach. The surface was primed bluish white, thick enough to mask the texture. Despite its bulk the frame was empty, a window unto snow.

She was just as I remember her. Of course, it was before the illness, before Africa, when she was—how shall I say it?—still herself: small, athletic, moving through the room with a dancer's grace and purpose. She wore faded corduroys and one of my own castoff white shirts—loose fitting, rolled above the elbow. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, strayed from the band at her neck. Her glasses were permanently spattered with paint, so she was always alternating between looking through them and over their tops.

She'd invited me to the studio. She liked having a witness. Of course, that's me, supplying an explanation. She never said. Pleased to be invited, I never asked.

Join me?

I followed with an armful of reading. I sat at one end of an old sofa

opposite the painting wall, under a reading lamp, though the general lighting from the ceiling was ample. We didn't talk. She worked. I read. Now and then I looked up to check on her progress.

She began by standing in front of the canvas. She hardly moved. I don't think she mapped out the whole painting. She mapped how she would begin, what mark would be first. But that's me again. It stands to reason. From this mark would come the next and the next and all the other marks. She took a long time getting started. Once going, she worked quickly.

Then I heard a scratch. She traced a long curve with a soft pencil from the upper left side across and down, strongest in the middle, faded at the ends. Silence. Then another, a harsh angle dropping along the left, top to bottom, followed quickly by a horizontal scrape from the vertical line clear across. Next she sketched a sort of busy, flower-like set of radiations in the midst of these lines. Not in the middle exactly. A little lower and to the right. An explosion of something. A whorl of quick, coordinated marks.

Now she was arranging and opening jars, pulling a table closer, drawing brushes from cans and drawers, assembling her kit. The room smelled of oil and thinner and soap.

I resumed reading.

I looked up when I finished the first of the articles I'd brought to the studio. There was now a concentration of color at the whorl, yellows and reds. She'd painted the long penciled curve and lines black, with a fat brush, a sort of calligraphy. A brush makes a different sound from a pencil. The pencil sounds like a fingernail drawn across the surface of a wall. The brush is like wind.

A while later she was doing something else. She'd lifted a plastic bag of white clay from a floor cabinet. She rolled a clump of it on the table. She rolled it thinner than you'd think clay could go. Pie dough came to mind. I'd never seen her do this. She pulled a long bit of white

quilter's thread from a drawer, thick and useful looking, and draped it across the rolled clay, pressing it in so it would stay. She'd already laid the canvas on the floor. She smeared one side of the clay with an adhesive. Then, using her hands like spatulas, she flipped the whole of it over like a pancake atop the colorful whorl on the canvas and patted it down. The color was gone: just white and the black calligraphy. She smoothed out the clay, pressing it into the canvas, then returned it to the wall.

For the next couple of hours, she painted the whole, including the clay, with great washes of variegated darkness. She painted with house brushes, some as wide as five inches, others as narrow as half an inch. She painted from a number of various-sized cans that lay on the floor at her feet. She painted fast. She held the brushes like knives in a deadly fight, loose in her palm, wrist up, thrusting and slashing at the stiff canvas as if it were enemy or prey. The painting became a wilderness of night, the hint of ridges and plains, skyline, shadows in shadow, suggestion of moonlight.

Throughout this I continued to read, smelling the new smells of different paint, the kind from buckets rather than tubes. I could hear her breath, her foot start and stop on the floor, gulp of brush in bucket, whoosh of paint on canvas.

Late that afternoon she was still once more.

She stood as before in front of the canvas, now a nocturnal landscape, shiny with wet paint. I thought of darkest night. I thought of waking from sleep alone in bed and all that nothingness. The painting that seemed so energetic in the making now seemed breathlessly sad, and I wondered how she felt, what panic the shadows evoked for her.

Then she unclasped her arms from her chest and stepped to the canvas. She got very close and reached out her hands and traced the surface without touching it until she found the end of the quilting thread, which she pulled suddenly and with the flourish of someone

uncovering a sheeted secret, and as she pulled, the soft clay ripped open with a gash that revealed the bright bloody yellow whorl beneath.

It looked as if something terrible and angry was rushing out from a tunnel. I was alarmed to see such color and movement in all that darkness. That, or there was light at the other end. I couldn't tell.

I

The present

He and the boy had been walking, save a couple of hours in the hottest part of afternoon, since the quarter moon rose at two o'clock that morning. From the settlement of Maikona on the edge of the Chalbi Desert, they skirted the Dida Galgalo plains, where you could look in every direction and not see one tree or even a bush, only lava rubble the color of rotted apples and grass between rocks, yellow as packing straw. The emptiness comforted him. The flat horizon, swept daily by unceasing wind, calmed his mind. He missed the place. He missed the people. But he also wanted the desiccation, the osmotic suck, to wipe his memories clean and blow them away.

They'd left at two o'clock in the morning because the trip at a camel's pace would take them eighteen hours, and they wanted to arrive when the camp was still awake. Two o'clock was also when the moon came up, slim as it was, and they needed its light to load the camels with jerry cans of water and their gear and to find the path amid the stones.

The owner of the camels, the boy's father, had known Abudo, knew where Abudo's camp was, and sent his son to show the way. The foreigner did not remember the boy, who would have been a child before. Now a teenager, Ali was tall, narrow, small shouldered, long legged. His almond face was handsome except for the pebbles of acne around his mouth. Ali refused his mother's help. In the end, she'd stepped in to reposition the loads and tighten the ropes. Ali made up for his lack of skill with teenage indifference. When he smiled, which in the beginning was not at all, the smile was shy and surprising.

They stopped to rest soon after daylight. So far they'd barely spoken. They sat in the shade of a low-slung tree on the edge of a *lagga*, a dry seasonal riverbed, and chewed tobacco. The camels, still loaded, browsed lazily at the branches of a nearby tree. The *ferenji* wore plain khaki shorts and a T-shirt and a canvas hat for the sun. The boy wore a black T-shirt and a *kikoi* made of Indonesian cloth with a jungle of green and blue potato-print shapes. Both wore sandals made of old tires—young people called them *Firestones*—the commonest footwear in the desert. The metal band of Ali's watch was too big for his wrist. He kept pulling it up his arm, and it kept falling down to his hand. The watch did not keep time, but it looked smart and Ali was proud of it. He sat with knees crossed and studied the plains beyond the shade.

He asked the boy how old he was.

Kudanijaa, he said. Sixteen.

Are you circumcised?

He might have asked if the boy was in school or played basketball. It was the sort of question he asked. What did Ali think of himself? Was he a boy or a man?

Ali opened the cloth, just like that, and showed him.

His penis lay like a cat against his thigh. The wound, a jagged pink ring.

The man remembered the way he and boyhood friends had shown off playground scars. It wasn't the penis that Ali revealed, or even his new status as a grown-up. It was the sign of where he'd been, what he'd been through, what awaited him. He said he was cut last Soom D'era, a good month for circumcisions.

Ali did not ask the man if he was circumcised. He asked if he was married, and then if it was the custom in his country to pay bride wealth before a marriage and how much.

The man said there was no bride wealth in his country. Then he added, in his own language, for he could not think how to say it in Ali's, that over there one paid for the marriage afterward. Ali did not follow, and the man did not repeat it. But Ali's eyes grew wide with a vision of free women. He was going to have to wait another twenty years before his father and older brother, who must marry before him, would produce the necessary camels, goats, sheep, cloth, and untold amounts of tobacco and coffee berries for the bride's family. In the end, however, Ali likened a free wife to a lover and said it was better if the groom's family paid for the bride. Then the children knew to whom they belonged. The man said he and his wife had had no children, and Ali looked at him sadly, despite his adolescence, because he knew to be sad about such things.

Nuyas, he said. Let's go.

Silence broken, Ali's talk soon outpaced the man's ill-remembered language. By afternoon they were walking again mostly in silence, smiling at each other, noting familiar kinds of tree or bush, stopping to chew and to wonder aloud how much longer.

Even before they reached Abudo's camp it was too dark to see, and he kept the path by following the camels' silhouettes against the stars. All day the windblown sand had chafed his skin. His neck and arms and calves prickled with sunburn. His feet, which had taken a beating on the rocks, ached. He walked with a sort of double limp, so as not to put full weight on either sole. He'd grown soft in his years away, unused to walking far in sandals. He'd filleted a big toe on an acacia stump first thing, and the blood made his right sandal sticky. In the gloom that evening, he stumbled and reopened the wound. He could feel the slick fresh blood. He cursed himself for coming.

Then he heard the camp noises. Faint, windblown sounds. Clatter of pots. Wooden camel bells. Tinny voices of women and children, like old songs on the radio. He smelled wood smoke and dust and the musky odors of large animals.

As he remembered it, the camp was a collection of some twenty tents, sixty or seventy people, four or five hundred camels, and thousands of sheep and goats. It was pitched now at Toricha, a place of gnarled thorn scrub below the hills of Badda Hurri, far to the north of where they'd started. He remembered Toricha from before. The sounds and smells in the night air were all familiar. But it was not the same. Nomads never camped in the same place twice. It was their business to move, to blow with the wind. Doubtless there would be people here he knew, who remembered him. There would be others he did not know. And there would be those he knew, and loved, who would be gone.

II

Ali handed him the rope and went alone amid the tents to announce their arrival and to find Abudo's brother. They planned to sleep at his tent.

He remained behind in the darkness. He could see the glow and glitter of small fires within the matted tents. Here and there the beam of an electric torch sliced across the blackness to the west, where the sheep and goats would be corralled. He was glad to have arrived, glad for once not to be walking. He was hungry and thirsty and, strangely, happy for the first time in months.

Someone approached.

Ali?

The figure chuckled. A man, not Ali.

Galchumi nagaya? said the voice, a whisper within the wind, offering the greeting of night. Have the camels returned peacefully?

Nagaya. *Kesan nagaya?* he replied.

It was Abudo's brother, Elema. They stood together in the darkness and exchanged the litany of greetings for evening, words you'd say to anyone: a familiar, a stranger.

Arma getani? Have you reached here?

Yagen, at' geti? he answered. We have. Have you?

Elema took the camels' rope, touched his arm, and led him around to the right of the tents. Elema made the camels lie on their haunches like sphinxes and left to get his wife to unload them. The front camel shook its head and snuffled and began, teeth clicking like dentures, to chew its cud.

Kōt. Elema told him to follow.

He followed.

At the tent door, he offered the usual greetings to those inside. They were answered. Elema's wife was working over her fire. She did not come out. Two children tumbled from the tent to see the stranger. They were not old enough to know him. Light from the fire spilled out through the curtained door. The children, boy and girl, clung to their father's legs and giggled. The father told them gruffly to bring a cow skin for the guest to lie on, which they did.

Elema sat on his stool just outside the door, wrapped in white muslin cloth, and the *ferenji* sat on the ground to Elema's right upon the stiff skin the boy brought. He wondered where Ali was. Probably drinking tea at a relative's tent. Elema's wife came out with a cup of tea, which she handed him without a word. He took it, and she went to unload the camels. As she worked she spoke to a woman in the next tent over. He listened hard. She told the woman that they had guests. She asked where the woman's daughter was and whether all the goats and sheep had been milked. Elema's wife ducked into her own tent, and soon the other woman passed without greeting and entered.

Elema was talking about rain. He did not speak of other things. The rains were overdue. The time was nearly past. He'd seen white egrets atop an acacia. Lightning flashed over the northern highlands. The animals were weak. Some were unable to make the widening journey between wells and pasture. They were dying, and the prices traders paid for goats and sheep were as low as Elema remembered.

If only it would rain, Elema said, everything would be all right.

Not everything, he thought.

But Elema probably didn't mean *everything*.

He missed details and nuances. For instance, he could not hear irony. Didn't know if they used it. He responded to what Elema and others said, echoed their verbs as they spoke, like a good listener, but without full understanding. His language wasn't good enough. Never had been. He moved through their world like a partially deaf man, reading lips, catching facts, guessing at meanings. It was only after much repetition, hearing different people in different contexts, that he put things together, piecemeal, an archaeologist assembling a broken vase from shards.

Elema did not speak of Abudo.

Elema asked the man about his home. How was his wife? Why hadn't she come with him? Had God given them children? Had he finished the book he was going to write? Did others know their suffering? Would they send help?

He answered carefully. He did not explain about her. He did not know how. What could he say? It wasn't done.

He said he'd finished the book. Only a few people would read it. Those who did might speak to others. You never know. He was doubtful. People over there hardly ever think of people here.

Elema said that was true. When our enemies are far away, we do not think of them. It is only when they attack and steal our animals that we think of them.

Elema whispered something into the tent.

They sat then for a while, chewing tobacco, listening to the sounds of the camp settling. Hushed voices within tents. The unending bleats and grunts of goats and sheep.

Another man joined them and sat on a stool beside Elema.

He did not recognize the new man, did not remember the voice.

They greeted. The man asked if he was the *ferenji* who, years ago, drew water for animals at the wells.

He smiled at the memory. He'd often drawn water, lifting bucket after bucket from the bottom of the well to the trough. It was work he could do, work he enjoyed.

He is the one, Elema said.

Elema and the man then spoke of camp matters.

He did not follow it all, something about a family's troubles, the result of drought.

They spoke in shorthand, with too much shared knowledge and too many idioms that he, after all this time, had lost or never learned.

A woman emerged from the tent with a milking bowl. She stood before him. He could not see her, only her shape against the night sky. It was not Elema's wife, who was smaller.

The woman bent down and held out the bowl.

Ho. Take this.

He accepted the bowl with both hands.

It was Ado, Abudo's wife.

He greeted. *Bartu?* he said. Are you strong?

Eh, she replied. She stood.

Nageni badada? Is there peace?

Badad'. There is.

Ijole urgoftu? he asked. Do the children smell good?

She suppressed a laugh. *Urgoftu*. They smell good.

The question was not often asked, but since he had learned it he had asked it mainly because he liked the way it sounded and he liked the meaning. Did the children smell good? Were they healthy and happy? Ado smiled whenever he asked it, and he liked to see her smile, so he had asked it every time. She lifted her hand shyly to cover her mouth.

Drink, she said and returned to the tent.

He was hungry and tired. He took a long draught of the milk. It was as good as he remembered, cool with the evening, smoke flavored from the way they preserved the containers with coals, slick on his dry throat. He knew to drink his fill and pass the bowl back. He drank half the milk and handed the bowl to Elema, who took it and held the bowl out for his wife in the tent.

The other man left. Ali turned up.

Tired from the journey, the *ferenji* lay on the skin beside Ali, wrapped himself in his sheet, and stared up at the stars, most of which were now hidden by black patches of cloud. It was eerie, like a negative picture. He could not see the clouds in the darkness but knew them because he could not see the stars they obscured. The sky was a map of the universe with blank areas, unknown territories—unknown to the mapmakers anyway, not to the inhabitants. The clouds were a good sign.

The milk bowl came out for Ali, who drank and passed it back. Ali lay down beside him on the cow skin.

Ali said the *ferenji*'s name. Said his name again. And again. He woke, grunted. Ali told him to eat. He looked up. Ali was sitting beside a bowl of meat. He could hear Elema inside the tent talking softly with his wife. He looked at his watch. It was just after one o'clock in the morning. Elema had killed a goat. He didn't want the meat. He wanted to sleep. But he sat up and reached into the bowl, feeling for a piece, and ate it. He found and ate another. He ate several more. He ate enough to be polite. Then he lay down. He cocooned his head inside the sheet. Ali looked back at him and continued eating.

Ali knew better. Eat meat when you can eat meat.

Later he woke cold, windblown, numb from the constant rubbing of air on his skin. The camp was quiet, save the ranting of goats and sheep. They never sleep, he thought. At least not all at once. He got up and hobbled over to the camel corral. His feet were sore, his back stiff. He squatted and pissed. The sky was black, no stars. The moon would have risen but no light leaked through the clouds.

He lay back on the skin. Ali was on his side, facing the tent, asleep.

It had been simple traveling. He knew what to do: Put one foot in front of the other. Now he'd come to the edge of something, and it was time to speak, but he had no words. The fear washed over him that he didn't know his lines, hadn't read the script, didn't know if there *was* a script. On the journey he'd set aside the nagging questions about what to do by telling himself that something would come to him when he arrived. Well, he was here. He'd come halfway around the world to see these people, not because they invited him, or even expected him, but because he wanted to see them, wanted them to want to see him. He wanted them to see. And he didn't want to make things worse.

He heard but did not feel the wind, and then he felt it. He smelled the dust. Then he felt drops, big musky clops.

Ali rose with his sheet pulled over his head, open at the face, and without speaking the two lifted the skins and squeezed into the tent. Before they were inside, the air was water, and he had to breathe through his mouth not to choke.

He wondered whether going into the tent was all right. The tent was not big enough for all of them. He followed Ali. Elema's wife made a noise at something Elema said. She rose and passed them with her daughter, and they left with a skin over them. She would go to Ado's tent. Ado was alone with just the young daughter.

He and Ali settled onto the wife's bed, a raised pallet of woven

sticks a foot off the ground. There were other skins atop the sticks, and they lay with the skins they'd brought inside covering them like tarpaulins. The tent was designed to keep out sun, not rain. It hardly rained enough to bother making tents waterproof. Soon rain trickled through the matted roof. Rain under a tree, he thought. The skins kept them relatively dry. But it was noisy with the rain drumming on the skins. It was impossible to stretch. His cramped muscles ached from the day. He could not turn. Ali was too close.

He nearly panicked. He felt out of breath. He breathed the stale air deeply.

He counted in his own language to one thousand and then in theirs—*tōk, lama, sadi, afur...*

Slowly his thoughts dissolved into the rain.

From the monograph, based on fieldwork among Dasse pastoralists, of rituals surrounding death and dying

The camel-herding nomads of the Chalbi Desert, known to each other and their neighbors as Wara Dasse, or simply Dasse, manage the ritual affairs of death in several stages that take years to complete. But there is first the burial, awala*, which occurs quickly, usually the same day as the death.*

Most people, they say, die naturally in the night, which gives survivors plenty of daylight to dig the grave. Of course, not everyone has the foresight to die before morning. I knew one woman who died early in the afternoon. The olla*, or encampment, was pitched on hard ground that was full of boulders, and the grave was exceedingly difficult to dig. We hurried to finish before nightfall. It would have been difficult to continue the work after dark. I suspect if she had died later in the day they would have buried her first thing the next morning. As it happened, we finished at dusk.*

I never had the impression that people hurried burials because they were afraid of the body or dead soul. Dasse have a concept of ghosts, called ekera*, but do not seem to have elaborate fears of them. People told me that ghosts sometimes lurk around for several years,*

that one can hear their voices on the wind at night and see fires by their graves. Dasse respect ancestors but do not worship them. They have only the vaguest idea of an afterlife. When someone dies, most Dasse say simply that they have gone away. They are reluctant to talk about a dead person. They use euphemisms in place of the verb to die. They say so-and-so has gotten lost, shifted away, gone to sleep, grown old, or grown fat.

I suspect the main reason they are quick to get the body into the ground is that the desert is hot and bodies decay quickly.

There is one legitimate reason to delay a burial. If a woman dies before her husband has handed over all of the bride price camels to her family, her body should not be buried until the husband has settled the debt. This is a powerful inducement for the husband and his family to come up with the remaining camels, before the dead woman is gone and forgotten. People told me about this rule in the context of marriage exchanges; I never heard of a woman dying before her korata *was paid.*

III

Eleven years before

He was gone most days, chatting up nomads who came to the wells, drawing water for camels, resting in shade with the old men, getting a sense of their days and nights, what they did, what they thought about. When he followed them back to their camps, he was gone for weeks on end. She remained alone at the mission, what was left of it, on the edge of the world. She and the solitary priest. The buildings had iron-sheet roofs that rattled in the wind. They were half a mile north of a settlement of thatch and wattle houses that stood nearer the wells. She filled her days reading and drawing, for she was an artist, but heat and loneliness and the banging metal roof wore on her. The priest had been out on the edge himself, alone among converts and would-be converts, separated for thirty years from friends and familiars. He was a small man with a sad livery face and a hesitant

smile, wary of the claims made on his generosity. When he wasn't in his frock for mass, he wore baggy black trousers and a white shirt. He was anxious of women. Even when all three were in the same room, he rarely spoke to her, and when he did, it was through her husband.

Let's go to the city, she'd said.

It was not a command. It was not a question. He said OK, though he didn't want to go. It was a way of making amends. For months they'd been disturbed by misunderstandings that erupted into arid silences.

Once, for instance, he'd returned late from a day's fieldwork.

You said you'd be home, she said.

I tried. I'm sorry. It's only an hour.

Only an hour? It's dark. I've been worried. What do you think I've been doing?

I'm sorry. I can't just walk away.

But I can wait? Is that what you're saying?

I didn't say that.

Then what?

I don't know. I'm sorry. Forget it.

What do you mean forget it?

So he'd agreed to go. A couple of weeks, he thought. He'd bring notes, write. The rest would do him good.

The journey took two days. That was fast. They were lucky. If it had rained, which it hardly ever did, the lorries they rode upon would

have mired in mud, and then it might have taken weeks. When it rained in the north few bothered to travel except on foot. But even in dry weather, the old machines, punished by constant use over roads as rough as riverbeds, often broke down, and you might sit there for a long while, for it was tough to find space on one midstream.

The first was a cream-colored Mercedes, big as a barge. It was loaded with goats and sheep bought from nomads at the wells. They rode with half a dozen others atop the tarpaulin-covered trapeze above the livestock. The humans were only slightly less miserable than the animals below. That leg took them without incident to Marsabit. They spent the night there and then caught a second lorry south. This one, similar to the other in make and size, carried crates of empty beer bottles, which clanked and rattled like a busy cafeteria. The thought of it tipping over and all that glass kept him awake the entire ride, which began at dawn and ended long after dark.

She covered her head with a cloth against the wind and sun and pretended to sleep.

A young man lying nearby asked if they were Germans.

No, he said, shaking his head.

You look like two Germans I met when I was in school.

Nope, he said. We’re Dasse, from the desert. Can’t you tell?

He smiled at this absurdity.

The other played along, switched to the desert dialect.

Gosi maan? What tribe?

Galbo, he answered.

Balbal tam? What clan?

Massa.

Maqakankenu? What’s your name?

Idema. It was what children called him.

Kaenu? Your father?

Abudo. Abudo Guyo.

Abudo was a Dasse, one he'd come to regard as a friend. They were about the same age, but Abudo was as close as anyone to being his sponsor, and that was sort of like being his father. Abudo would laugh to hear the story.

The other shook his head. For a minute he simply stared and smiled. Except for the smile, he might have been about to turn away in disgust or reach over and hug him. He couldn't say.

The *ferenji* broke the spell.

I'm writing a book about Dasse.

Aiya! the other said. Why didn't you say so? I am a teacher. It is good what you do. Learn our language. It's good. It's good. Make contact.

Yes, he agreed. Make contact.

The wind and dust and growling engine soon absorbed each in his private thoughts, and they quit talking and stared out at the plains until it was dark, and then they stared into the darkness.

He was propped above the cab. He watched the headlights slice into the night. The track was rough, a pale yellow brown, banked on both sides by the void. The surface streamed by beneath, and with the weirdness of light and movement the road looked like a muddy river from the middle of a bridge. There was no other traffic. Suddenly the lights overtook a pair of hyenas, startled by the oncoming noise, and they shambled along by the side of the road. Then one panicked, turned into the lorry's path, as if to cross to the other side, and it became another of the many riffles in the road. The other peeled off into the darkness. He felt sad for the hapless one eaten by the wheels. Sad as well for its partner. Abudo wouldn't have understood his feelings.

He looked across to the teacher, who was asleep.

The cooling air, soft and humid in his nostrils, was the first sign they were nearing their mountain destination. It had been night for a couple of hours. She rose in the dark. I'm cold, she said. He gave her the sweater he carried in his pack, and she curled up nearby. He noticed the dim lights of farmhouses. The temperature continued to drop as they rose in elevation. She woke again and leaned against him, and he put his arm around her shoulder and rubbed her back and tried to warm her.

The dirt highway became a paved highway, then widened into a central boulevard. They had arrived. It was late. There was hardly any traffic. Dark buildings on either side were silhouetted against stars. The grimy yellow glow of oil lamps leaked out from a couple of storefronts. On the patio of a bar men and women were drinking beer, and in their midst a solitary old man in a knit cap was dancing to the brassy rhythms from a jukebox. Nighthawks drifted along the road. The lorry blasted into the white light of a petrol station. It growled to a stop near the market. Those ending journeys dropped with their gear to the ground.

Idema! the other called down. He was continuing to the capital.

Eh?

Make contact!

Aiya. Nagayati! Peace!

Who was that? she asked.

Just a guy. We talked on the way. I forget his name. He's Dasse.

What's he mean, make contact?

I suppose he just likes getting to know people.

The city was more of a town, a trading center for highland farms and ranches, end of the northern rail line, center for tourists setting off on safaris up the snow-covered mountain. The town sat on the equator. A sign said so. They woke the manager and booked a cottage at a lodge twenty minutes by foot from the market where they'd left the lorry. It was a collection of thatched *bandas* surrounded by a tall wooden stockade. The bedroom had a small fireplace and plenty of firewood for the chilly nights, and the compound was shaded against daytime sun by tall eucalyptus trees with peeling olive-colored bark and long sharp leaves that whispered in the breeze.

The cottage had a kitchen. They spent the first morning laughing, arm in arm, buying fruits and vegetables, real coffee instead of the loose tea they drank on the desert, beer in large brown bottles. He'd brought along his handheld tape recorder and she, music from home they could listen to at night while they watched the fire. He held the sack in his left hand over his shoulder. She held his right hand. They picked their way along the paths between rows of vendors who sat on boxes and stools, stacks of produce at their feet: mangoes and onions and peppers and papayas and tomatoes and cloth and metal serving bowls and charcoal stoves and loose brown tobacco and black medicinal roots and powdered orange and yellow spices.

When they found something they liked, they'd squat and greet the seller, and because nobody here knew Dasse they used a kitchen dialect of the national language.

She enjoyed bargaining with the women.

Habari, Mama? she said. She lifted an orange. *Unataka shilingi ngapi kwa machungwa nne?* How much for these?

Mzuri, Bibi, the old woman said. *Shilingi kumi.* Ten shillings.

Hapana, she answered with both the shake of her head and a smile. *Shilingi sita.* Let us have them for six.

It was the vendor's turn to shake her head.

Lete nane. Bring eight.

Sawa. All right.

They grinned at each other.

Why bargain so hard? he asked as they strolled away.

It's the custom, she said. You know that.

But they do it for money.

Money's just an excuse.

She was still smiling, half serious.

It just seems mean, he said.

Maybe, she said. But she liked talking with us. You could tell. I think it was fun for her, too. You heard how she blessed us. Besides, I bet we're still paying *wazungu* prices.

Her spirits had risen. She enjoyed the cool air, the market, the radiant, succulent, soothing green leaves on all the trees, before which a swirl of customers and vendors and produce was an exciting tableau. They strolled along the pathways, bought what they wanted, talked with people, enjoyed the change of scenery.

This is nice.

Yes, he said.

Maybe I could move here.

For a while he didn't say anything.

We'd hardly see each other. You might as well go home.

She waited.

I'm thinking about it.

Moving here?

Going home.

Her eyes filled.

I'm sorry, she said. I want to go home... I don't want to live

in Maikona anymore.

He didn't know what to say. He knew she'd been unhappy, but she'd never spoken of leaving.

Why can't you work here? she said. I'd live here.

They don't interest me.

Why not? They're people. They're interesting.

It's too late, he said. I don't have time.

Well, I don't either.

What's that mean?

That you might have considered me when you decided where you were going to work...

We've been through this.

...where both of us would be happy.

They were attracting the attention of vendors and passersby, who stopped to listen, not understanding the words but knowing the drama well enough.

We agreed, he said.

We agreed to the continent, not the desert.

He pulled her forward. She was still speaking.

I imagined something like this, where it's green and normal and people don't gawk or come out of nowhere and touch my hair.

Is it so bad?

We didn't talk about the desert.

We talked about the desert.

You talked about it. It wasn't discussed. You wanted the desert. I couldn't exactly tell you to work somewhere else. You might have asked.

You don't ask me about your paintings.

I can paint anywhere.

Then why not Maikona?

You don't understand.

I'm trying.

You just don't.

Oh, sweet.

My sister says I can stay with her.

You've talked about this with her?

We write.

Jesus. What did you say? Are you really leaving?

You're the one who left.

What's that mean?

Don't you know?

I mean, about us?

It wasn't fair. He asked anyway. He told himself he'd have done the same for her. But it wasn't true, and he knew it. He didn't think he asked too much.

I'm sorry. I hate that this is happening.

It's OK, she said. I'll cook us a nice dinner. We'll drink some beer. We'll make a fire. It'll be all right.

That's what she did with all that.

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If you'd like a review copy, please contact Midge Raymond at midge@ashlandcreekpress.com.

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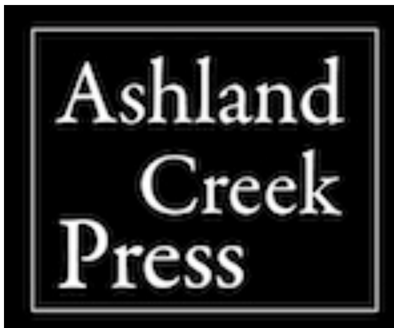

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