

MUTATU LOT, NAIROBI, KENYA

A knock on the tailgate? Imaginary or not was hard for Flo to say. Reality had that melty quality fever produces. But certainly she was in a parking lot in Nairobi. She stared out the back of the covered truck at a rectangle of sky.

The second knock was sharper, insistent.

"*Jambo jambo?*" called a guy. British, by the sound of the syllables.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Can I climb up?"

Neither of them could see over the tailgate—he was outside, standing on the ground behind the truck, and Flo was inside, lying flat on a bench.

"Now?" she asked.

"I should think so," he said.

Flo propped herself up on her elbows. A *djembe* or *taarab* rhythm blasted from a passing bus, and dust the color of peaches floated through the frame.

"Coming aboard."

Boot, step, hand hold, boot, step, footrail.

A torso appeared over the tailgate—some white person in his late twenties. About Flo's age. He had thick, unruly brown hair, friendly face. He sized her up. She was meshed in rivulets of sweat, hair matted, T-shirt stained, breasts loose beneath the fabric, khaki shorts, long legs scratched and healing.

Flo smiled.

"Fancy going north?" he asked.

"Which north?"

"Egypt," he said.

Flo forced herself to sit-up. Egypt demanded that she sit up.

"Then London."

He hiked himself over the tailgate, maneuvered around backpacks and stalks of thumb bananas, plopped on a side bench. Thick armpit hair tufted from the cut-off sleeves of his jumpsuit.

"I'm Charlie."

He offered Flo a cigarette. She declined. It was hard enough to maintain a seated position and talk.

"So you're American. And you're...."

Flo said her name, though in Egyptian myths, that meant giving him power over her. *But he was the one who'd come unbidden.* Out of all the trucks and taxis in Nairobi's central parking lot, he went to hers.

She watched him take in the clods of dirt on the floor, the side and back benches coated in dust, the half-emptied bag of flour.

"Long trip?" he asked.

"Eight weeks," she said. "We did a chunk of Congo."

He nodded.

Eight weeks in Congo meant Flo's overlanding skill set was razor sharp. She could barter for rice, lash gear, filter water, tend fires, set guy-lines, stew goat. Fear of nocturnal creatures, of

diurnal creatures—primate or insectoid or reptilian: she was way past that. Past the awkwardness of being the only white woman villagers have ever seen, kids screaming at the sight of Caucasian skin, the bravest ones smiling and daring to stroke her blond hair, touch her hand.

Charlie blew a smoke ring Flo admired.

“Malaria?”

She told him it was probably the Zairois kind. Flo didn’t mention the iffy roadside *samousa* she’d bought at a well stop in the Ituri rainforest. She thought it was goat, but John, the driver, said it was bush meat. Monkey, possibly, or bat. Something still in abundance. She couldn’t help herself—starving. There’s only so many bananas she could eat on any given day. Eight, ten. It was a long time between breakfast and dinner.

“Malaria passes.” Charlie was thin. He’d seen his share.

When she asked where he’d come from, Charlie said he’d started in Jo’burg. The roads had been rough in Tanzania, but they’d spotted lions, rhinos, what have you, thousands of wildebeests. “The truck quaked so hard when the herd charged the gear tumbled from the bins.” He puffed thoughtfully. “It weighs about 25,000 pounds. Custom-made safari cruiser. Bedford—better than Mercedes Benz.”

They looked at each other, then the tailgate. Someone was yelling loudly in the parking lot. It wasn’t Swahili. Kukuyu, maybe Cushitic.

Although Flo didn’t know much about overland vehicles, Charlie’s truck sounded first class—not like the one she was in, basically a flatbed covered in a canvas frame that rolled up and down regulating air, protection—storage beneath the benches, under the floor and over

the cab.

She scratched the bite on her kneecap and described roads so bad in the Congo that they weren't even roads. She'd spent days digging the tires out of thick, reddish muck, as if the very guts of the Earth were oozing from the slash in the jungle between Kampala and the Mountains of the Moon. Once or twice a day, a Congolese pick-up inched by in the opposite direction, occupants astonished by the marooned *mzungus*. The opportunity was just too good to pass up, worth a story or two. The Congolese were barefoot and wore T-shirts with English logos, like "Gap" and "United Colors of Benetton." Flo's group was barefoot too, after losing flip-flops to the suck, jungle guts up to their knees. Mud splattered their bodies, spackled their ridiculous whiteness, save for two Londoners who'd paid full fare for the privilege of meeting the Bambuti Pygmies and observing Mountain Gorillas in the wild. Immaculate, they sat primly on the benches in the back, cushioned by financial superpower, watching the others dig until John told them to get out—sometimes every storage bin emptied to lessen the weight. The Congolese helped John steer clear of the guts, which often involved backing up and going at it again on a minutely altered path while insects vibrated the trees and colorful *kalikokos* swooped through the sky. Baboons in the branches masturbating, watching.

Charlie smiled. A tiny plume of smoke swelled, evaporated. He'd seen mud like that too, in the jungles of Rwanda. George, his driver and business partner, had done the continent twice before. Passengers were switching out in Nairobi. "We're looking for overlanders."

Flo straightened her spine, tried to look crew. Willed her fever away. Egypt was calling. For reasons Flo never understood, Egypt called.

It calls still.

In her memory, a group of white overlanders sets out from Nairobi to Cairo toward the end of the last century. The characters have no fear, no knowledge of death's adjacency. They didn't worship the gods as the rites demanded, although Flo listened for voices, whenever they came, for guidance. Most were young. Some laughed loudly, some fucked the locals and drank all the alcohol they could find. Others scored cannabis outside grass huts. Flo, especially, thrilled to experience, opened to everything, whatever it was. They were all in it together. They took chances. They made mistakes. Even now, Flo tenses and remembers, remembers and tenses.

"Sudan is massive," Charlie said. "Egypt nearly as big." It would take four or five months to get to Cairo, another ten days or so, depending on weather, to get to the UK.

That was the point where Flo mentioned McDowell, her Scottish boyfriend. "I have to check with him."

McDowell was unpredictable. But Flo had more money left than he did.

Charlie told her there was room for two, said to pop over in a couple of hours to meet George, pointed in the direction of the truck. "Far end of the lot. Orange with a white stripe."

He disappeared over the tailgate, and Flo lay back down on the bench, breathing deeply, wondering if she was dreaming about passage to Egypt. Somehow, she always knew she was meant to go there, but she had no idea how to do it until a stranger arrived with an invitation.

The fever lifted on invisible wings, heading north.