

A novel of courage, love,
betrayal, and death on safari

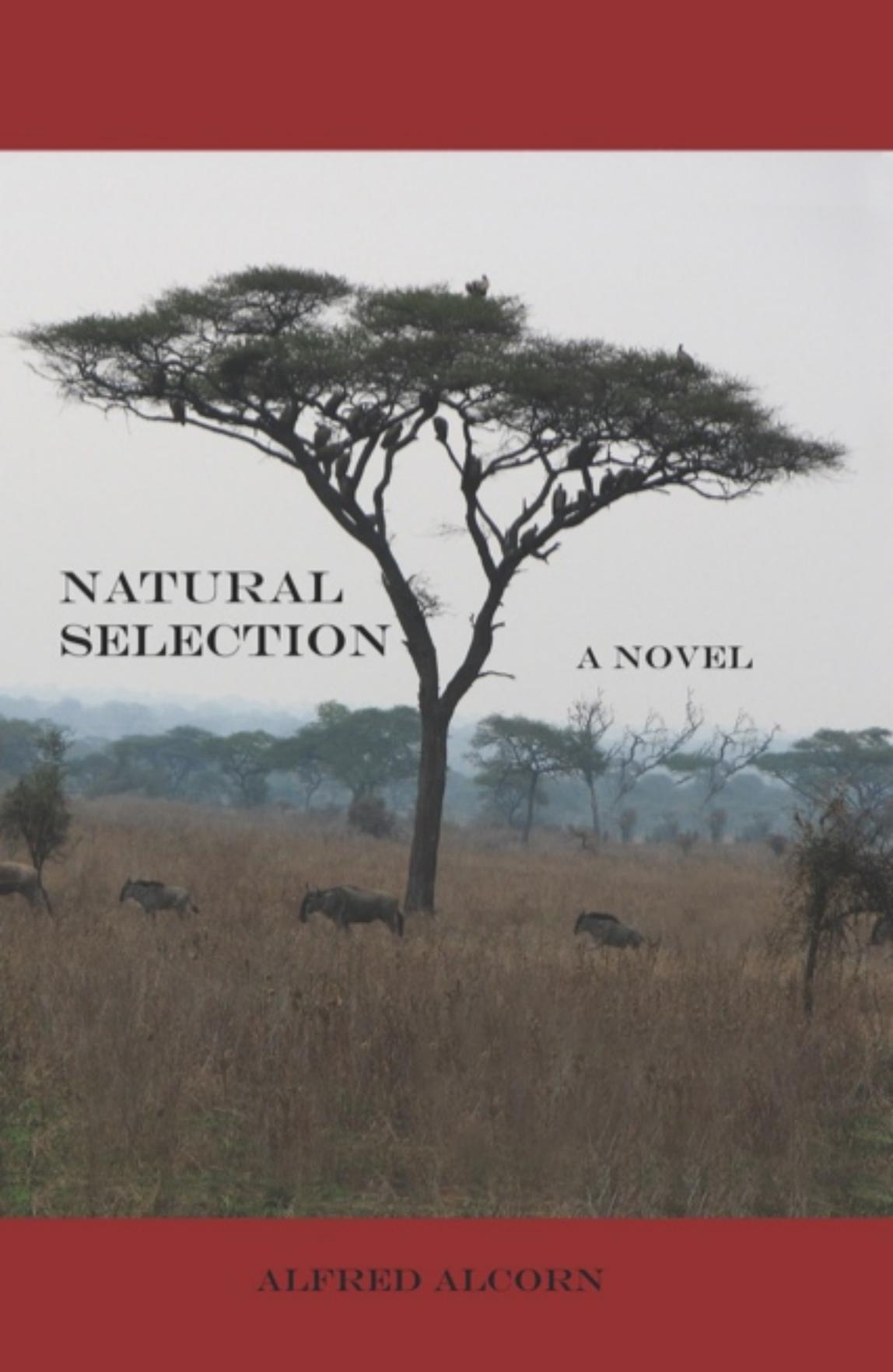
Natural Selection

by Alfred Alcorn

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A large, dark silhouette of an acacia tree stands prominently in the center of a savanna landscape. The tree's canopy is wide and flat, with several birds perched on its branches. In the foreground, a herd of animals, including a rhinoceros and several wildebeest, is grazing in a field of tall, dry grass. The background shows a hazy horizon with more trees and distant hills under a pale sky. The entire scene is framed by a dark red border at the top and bottom.

**NATURAL
SELECTION**

A NOVEL

ALFRED ALCORN

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Hardcover ISBN 978-1-60145-448-5

Paperback ISBN 978-1-60145-447-8

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Colrain Press ColrainPress.com

2008

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Alfred Alcorn

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Marlene Rich joined the birding group late. She came across the dewy grass in short, tentative steps. Nick Mercer hung back to greet her, his voice quiet, keeping with the decorum among birders. She smiled at him, her own hello as subdued as his.

Glossy haired and shapely in safari shirt and jodhpurs, the younger woman stood out among the assemblage of graying oldsters, which had paused near the entrance gate to look at a pied wagtail, a small bird neatly patterned in black and white that scratched in the gravel.

In the early morning coolness, the group of seven, their faces raised and expectant, moved on among the rondavels in the walled garden above the misted lake. They kept to the path through the banana plants and giant poinsettias that grew along the wall. Trees native to East Africa and a giant bombax from Brazil spaced the lush lawns set with meticulously tended beds of cannas. Clouds of brilliantly colored bougainvillea tumbled down the hillside from the rondavels on the open side of the garden to shaded rows of coffee bushes. Then Lake Duluti, framed by figs and silky oaks. It was hardly the wild Africa Marlene expected, but the trees and shrubs were alive with birds.

She noticed that Nick accompanied the birding walk that first morning of the safari more as a shepherd than as a guide. It was Stan and Ellie Whipple, keen birders from Poughkeepsie, who found the golden oriole in the sausage tree that grew outside the dining room. And the fish eagle as it glided out of the lake fog to perch, distant and heraldic, on a dead branch. Now it was Ellie, up ahead, who spotted the flock of fire finches. Caught in the angled light of the rising sun, they appeared as puffs of dusty crimson against the damp verdure of the lawn.

Nick offered his binoculars to the newcomer.

“Are you sure?” she asked. The violet tints of her eyes showed surprise and pleasure at his gesture. Her lowered voice had a darkness he found attractive.

“Of course.” He resisted telling her that it came with the job. Lest he sound dismissive of his own thoughtfulness. He draped the straps over her head in a mock investiture. “Be careful. Birding can get serious.”

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Her smile seemed inward as she raised the glasses to her eyes and murmured, "It seems harmless enough." He helped her adjust the focus. Close, he caught the scents of her hair and skin beneath a lingering tang of jet fuel.

"Beautiful," she said, finding the range, "they really are beautiful."

"And those are just finches."

"Frank should see these..."

The Frank of the Mr. and Mrs. on the list of names. He asked, "Where is Frank? Kipping in?"

"Kipping in?"

"Still sleeping?"

She lowered the glasses, looked at him, the tints of her eyes more pronounced. She said, "Not Frank. He was out at dawn."

"Really? Doing what?"

"Shooting."

"Shooting?"

"Taking pictures. He's a photographer."

"I know. Where did he go?"

"Around the lake."

"By himself?"

"I guess."

Nick frowned. "He shouldn't have done that. It's dangerous."

"Because of people or animals?"

"Both. But mostly people."

It was the best he could do for remonstrance. That voice. Not that she didn't catch the edge of annoyance and, beyond that, the effort it might have taken him to care. Her eyes showed a mischievous sympathy that turned guarded. The guide did not relent. But when she offered to give back the binoculars, he insisted she keep them. Their return might seem a gesture of rejection. "I don't need them," he said. "I've already seen most everything." Her thanks came with a smile that lingered just beyond gratitude. He turned away to attend to the others.

Atop the vine-draped wall in front of the rondavels he pointed out a paradise flycatcher for the group. The black and rufous bird floated behind itself a tail nearly four times the length of its body. In a podium voice, though still quietly, the guide explained that the bird's banner-like

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tail, like any apparent extravagance in nature, posed a problem for evolutionary theory: that is, it did not seem to serve any ostensible purpose. Indeed, it might be construed as a hindrance for the bird in catching prey or avoiding predators.

Stan Whipple, who was tall and lean, his patrician honk of a piece with close-cropped graying hair and an L. L. Bean windbreaker, moved on and found a mousebird, which also had a long tail. Blue-naped or speckled? asked his wife. Eleanor, Ellie, Whipple was a well-preserved woman of seventy who wore jeans and rode horses. Field glasses to her seamless face, hair managed back to a bun, she said quietly and firmly, "It must be speckled. It doesn't have a blue nape."

Emily Tice, a tiny woman with white cap of hair and pixie nose, aimed her video camera at the moss-draped trees, the flowers, the birds, the clouding sky, and the people on their curious quest, all the while chattering brightly into the thing.

The Weisers brought up the rear. Thin and ailing, Bernice gimped along, brash, uptown voice asking, "What's that?" as she pointed her cane at something in the trees that had already flown away. She had been a beauty once. Now her skin was mottled and the flesh beneath her large, moist eyes showed dark. She wore a wig artfully tinted gray to look natural. Cancer, the guide had surmised. Martin, her husband, a retired doctor, stayed with her, his expression disclaiming any virtue in his obvious patience.

When the Weisers had caught up, when he had their attention, Nick, merging into N. Mercer, the paleoanthropologist, resumed his off-hand lecture on evolutionary theory. As guide, he had a license of sorts to expatiate, whether anyone listened or not. "There's no apparent reason," he declared, "why the long tails of the flycatcher and mousebird were selected. That is, what evolutionary advantage might accrue from such an appendage? Unless it's related to fitness." He waited until he had their eyes. "Fitness is the term biologists use for reproductive success. Fitness is the basis of natural selection and evolution. One theory proposes that the male has a long tail to show females that he is a fit mate because he can 'afford' such an extravagance."

He found Marlene Rich listening intently, his binoculars held against her jacket with both hands.

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Dr. Weiser, who was ruddy and blue eyed under a thatch of white hair, sounded politely skeptical. "Perhaps evolution makes mistakes?" The intonation in the doctor's European accent intimated doubts about Darwinism.

Nick experienced the amazement of a true believer getting a whiff of heresy. He drew himself up to his six foot plus height and ran a hand over sandy blond hair that had begun to recede. He tugged at his prominent nose. "Right. Good point. But by definition, any species still in existence is successful in terms of evolution." He paused. "The logic of evolution doesn't involve concepts like mistakes. I mean inasmuch as it's a response by organisms to the environment, not a consciously active agent. But, you could say it succeeds by failures, given how many species have gone extinct." Puzzlement. He modulated the flint in his Vermonter's voice. "But what we're talking about here is that nearly every species needs some mechanism for selecting within itself who gets to breed. It's called sexual selection. The contest over who has the longest and showiest tail may be less costly than say... ritual conflict... or even actual conflict."

His glance happened again on Marlene Rich. And he wondered if he wasn't flicking too obviously his own appendage of erudition.

If the guide paid more attention to the younger, more attractive member of the group than to the others as they shambled along in the warming light, it could be excused on the grounds that she was an initiate in this arcane ritual. Not that anyone seemed to mind when he made sure she saw the pair of silvery cheeked hornbills flying raucously overhead or the black flycatcher that darted out of a giant fig and caught an invisible insect. Then there was the ibis posing for them in the distance, a hadada, according to Ellie. And even the Weisers got to see the rattling cisticola that emerged from a bush to scold them.

Where the bougainvillea sloped down to the coffee plantation and the lake beyond, the Whipples had gone ahead again. They gestured for the rest to catch up and be quiet. In a patch of bright light, a malachite sunbird fluttered back and forth with preternatural iridescence amid orange-flowered leonitis, drinking nectar with its curved bill from the raceme of tufted flowers named for their resemblance to lion manes. The

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beauty and then its transience - the bird flew away - left everyone silent for a moment.

Nick, returning to the lectern, ventured that the nectar-sipping sunbirds, in filling the same ecological niche in Africa as the hummingbirds in the Americas, represented a good example of convergent evolution. The term necessitated a cumbersome explanation for Bernice, who nodded, more in appreciation of his effort than of any elucidation he might have achieved for her.

He kept to himself thoughts about how bird-watching itself should puzzle students of human evolution. What was it selected for? How did it contribute to fitness? Was it a search for beauty? But what of beauty itself? Except, he would argue with those he might argue with, where human behavior was concerned things got a deal muddier. But not entirely, not when it came to basics. People, he would insist, are mammals, organisms, part of nature.

As well as something else.

An uncertain sky thickened into an unseasonal drizzle just after lunch and canceled a walk around the lake with local guides. Nick lay on the bed in his rondavel staring up at the thatch, the gift of time like a weight he couldn't quite lift. He had been mentally circling around his notebook, which lay open on the desk next to a thick clutch of photocopied articles on hominid evolution.

He had dozed, the balm of light sleep coming with a dream of Marlene Rich as a sunbird flitting around in the corners of his mind, a walled garden where he had trapped her, but only for a moment.

He woke thinking about her. At lunch she had reverted to being half of that mysterious, quotidian thing, a married couple. He didn't see much of her, hedged in as he was at a table with the Dardleys, Marsh and Marie, and with Emily Tice. The Dardleys had the vociferous energy of the well slept. Emily got up several times to video-tape the lunch.

At an opportune moment, the guide gestured Frank Combers aside to an empty table by the window with the sausage tree outside. For a little lecture. A hornbill flew down and scratched in the ground with its huge beak. Frank watched it, his tawny eyes alert and judging, like those of a predator. Or an artist.

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“You could have been robbed of your cameras,” Nick said, trying to make the man’s unescorted walk around the lake sound as dangerous as it was.

Frank made the guide’s office seem easy, listening with head bent to one side, sympathy evident in his strange eyes, as though it was Nick who had a problem.

The guide upped the stakes. “You could have been beaten up. Or even killed.”

Frank’s eyebrows went up. He was a dark-haired man who looked younger than his forty-seven years. Some might have considered him attractive because rather than despite the eyes. He nodded again, his acknowledgment detached, as though his life, like his cameras, had a value worth weighing. In the wake of an amiable silence, he said, “Marlene tells me you’re really into evolutionary theory.” He spoke in a patrician voice with an overlay of California drag, a voice that conveyed a promise of approval.

“To say the least.”

“I’d like to talk to you about it some time.” His smile made the request seem like a benefaction.

Nick succumbed easily enough to the man’s charm. He picked up his wide-brimmed Aussie hat, the worn leather going slack, and stood up. The grimace he had attempted had eased into an answering smile. His admonition had the warmth of a shared pleasantry. “Right. I’m also interested in evolutionary reality. That means survival. In this case yours.”

To which the photographer had easily assented.

Now, as he brooded in his round cabin of stone, plaster and thatch, Nick Mercer wanted to be in Laetoli. He lifted up a sheaf of papers, glanced at them, and put them down. Laetoli. The footprints in the petrified volcanic ash, two adults and a youngster, haunted him. He saw them walking in the soft rain of soot from Sadiman as it rumbled in the distance. Godlike, he would find and resurrect them. Which he had already done, in his nightly sojourns, anyway. He had initiated, had practically organized the expedition that had arrived the night before on the same KLM flight as his group.. But he had been left off the final list.

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No Nick Mercer, who didn't need airfare, who supplied his own rattling old Rover, who came cheap. Maybe too cheap.

George Klember had been apologetic, distressed to learn that the fax sent to cover the gaff had not gotten through. He had shaken Nick's hand with effusive warmth. He had harrumphed, so British he might have been made out of tweed. "But you'll still be joining, yes? That survey, Nick, first rate. We should arrange to drive out together."

To which Nick, in a state of chagrin and relief, had explained that he had signed up to guide a safari group of eleven from the Finchley Museum. Klember had twilled his beard and told him to check in with Cromwell & Fitch when he got back. Expect you within the fortnight.

He stared at the ceiling, at a tiny, motionless gecko. The expedition, a joint British Japanese venture would be in Laetoli by now, unloading the Bedfords, unpacking tents, tables, chairs, lanterns, dishes, stoves, bedding, tools. They would erect what amounted to a temporary village, as though a tribe of peculiar nomads had happened on the scene. Had he been on the list, Nick would have gone ahead of them to help the native crew dig the latrines, if only to keep an eye out for strata and fossils as they did so. He would have brought along the fixings for his not always acclaimed goat stew.

Which was prologue to what amounted to an addiction: to be on his knees, on his stomach if necessary, picking carefully with a dentist's probe at some fossilized remnant of an ancient ancestor imbedded in the ground. Or fingering dirt, parsing it like a text, coaxing out its story. Or sifting a pile of debris in a *karai*, ridiculously excited to uncover even a fragment of australopithecine tooth, another part of the gigantic, ever shifting, multi-layered puzzle, the bits and pieces of which he was helping find and fit together.

So it galled, balls-up or not, to be left off the final list. It was his dig. He and Juma Bey from the National Museum had found the outcropping. They had done the preliminary survey, turning up an associated system of *makerongo* or gullies. He had been out since poking around. He knew there were hominid fossils there. He had dreamed about them. He had given them names. They had spoken to him.

Nick had his notebook handy for notes. But he could not make himself think the way he wanted to think. Marlene Rich flitted around his

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thoughts like a sunbird just out of reach. You don't have to, she had said, letting him drape the binoculars, the pleasure in her eyes the more provocative for being reticent. But then, the woman was married.

He got off the bed and went into the spartan bathroom to take a shower. The water, tepid at best, might help him focus. He stepped out of the spray, working shampoo into his hair. His time with Angela Kirkland had rendered showers an occasion of erotic nostalgia. They used to shower together, to save water, they told each other, but mostly as a prelude or a postlude, lathering each other up, jumping the gun or rising to it again, her hand deft, her dark blond hair slick like an otter's. He soaped up the rest of his body. Now he thought about Marlene Rich, summoning her imagined presence, conflating it with visceral memory. Yes, she would say, as he stood behind her, like that, and that, until she had him and he her, like that.

The cold water rinse brought him back to the present and the time that was his own, to the thatched ceiling, plastered walls, and bamboo furnishings. He towed briskly and put on clean boxer shorts and pressed chinos, good laundry being a safari perk. His best shirt for the welcoming dinner. He brushed his hair and looked at his face and into his own gray eyes and reminded himself that he had things to do.

The aura of re-enacted memory lingered. Angela Kirkland's desertion of him to take up with the Reverend Rupert Nichols had left Nick more than sexually bereft. Conflicted. The word scarcely described his feelings. He belatedly yearned for the romance of permanence - with Angela - while relieved of the subtle pressure she exerted for a more traditional arrangement. He needed to be free, he would convince himself in those moments of doubt and regret, free to enslave himself to his obsession.

Clean from the shower and nattily dressed, if not quite composed, the guide sat at the small desk to think like the N. Mercer who had published twice now in learned journals devoted to human evolution. However insignificant in the larger scheme of things, the papers helped sustain a dream of greatness: these were to be his *Beagle* years, when, like his hero Charles Darwin, he would be out in the real field, observing, collecting, thinking. His servitude as a graduate student and all that implied could come later if at all. Rather, he would emerge from his

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African chrysalis as a full-blown authority. That he would show his dad, Dr. Henry Mercer, who was willing to underwrite his graduate studies but not this lengthening foray into the field, that he was not frittering away his life.

It was in this persona that he wanted to be at the dig near Laetoli, the place not far from where, nearly twenty years before, Mary Leakey had excavated the fossilized imprints of fully erect beings walking through volcanic ash. That discovery and the unearthing of Lucy by Johanson and his team in the Afar region of Ethiopia confirmed that bipedalism had preceded the enlargement of the cranium more than three million years ago. To Nick the crucial question remained: how and why did we come to walk on two legs?

He had, in other words, ventured into theory, into that treacherous realm where the imaginative attempts to account for the real. His ideas had begun as a inner itch, scarcely more than variations on established hypotheses about bipedalism, tool use, altruism, adaptation, neotany, and the like. Did walking upright allow us to use weapons? And what role did the human and pre-human predilections for collective, persistent, and deadly violence play in the development of intelligence?

A knock on the door brought him back to the ever present present. Joyce Waddell, the tour escort from the Finchley Museum, without quite waiting for his “come in,” pushed open the door and stood on the threshold. She held a newspaper over her blow-dried hair, which had been tinted a shade too red for her complexion. On the short side, wide and handsome, she might have been more attractive if less insistence had shown in her eyes or if her regular, pretty features had not started to thicken and flare with patches of pink. A secret boozier, Nick wondered, acquainted as he was with the species.

She started with a forced smile and her distracted voice said, “Toddy's in number twenty-seven. He says there's no hot water. And his radio's been stolen.”

“Welcome to Africa.” The guide felt nearly as cheerful as he sounded. “Although I doubt his radio's been nicked.”

“He wants to see you immediately.” She gave him the closing parentheses of another false smile and withdrew, leaving the door ajar.

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Toddy Krammer in number twenty-seven. Nick walked up the groomed path through the rondavels, soothed by the freshness of the light rain. Toddy, he anticipated, belonged to that class of people who, in their regard for their comforts and prerogatives, confused their propensity to whine with the exercise of discriminating taste. They came with the territory, the Toddy Krammers of the world, giving a petulant “Come in” to a knock on his door.

“What's up?”

“What's up?” The echo sounded with an expression of You know very well what's up.

Toddy was on the thin side, a blondish, pallid man, with small, afflicted eyes, a querulous mouth, and an uncertain chin with a bushy mustache that managed somehow to look like a hairpiece. He stood incongruously against the bridal sweep of mosquito netting over the bed behind him. He ticked off his grumbles as though he were gloating. Why was there no hot water for a shower? Why was he in a rondavel so far from the main lodge? Why were there lizards in the ceiling? And why was his short-wave radio that he was sure, absolutely sure, he had packed, missing?

Nick assumed the pose of an unflappable, quasi-British, utterly professional safari guide. It worked on certain people. He would, he said, inquire about hot water, adding that sometimes there was no water to be had at all. As for room assignments, that was the luck of the draw. But Mr. Krammer was certainly welcome to his hut, which was closer to things but smaller. As for the radio, it was unlikely to have been stolen because jobs in the lodge were prized and anyone caught stealing was fired. And the little geckos that lived in the straw caught insects and were harmless. He oiled and warmed his voice to make the undertone of condescension sound like reassurance. “I mean it is, after all, Africa.”

Toddy's eyes snapped. “It's not what I was led to expect.” He was used to having people grovel.

Nick tried some rough bonhomie. “Yeah, but think about it, you're on safari. You're in Africa. If you don't expect too much, you'll find it very rewarding. You'll be fine.”

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Toddy did not wish to exchange rondavels. He did not want to be mollified. He wanted to be miserable. And he looked to be miserable for the duration of the trip. It was a privilege he had paid for.

“Looks to me like we hit the geriatric jackpot. I mean like we’re the juniors big time.” Frank Combers was lolling on the bed, propped on pillows behind the gauzy netting, leafing through a copy of *Doubletake* he had brought along.

Marlene Rich laid out her clothes for the dinner. The hacking jacket she had designed herself. Well, not actually designed, just some adjustments to the original classic. It went well, scuffed suede and all, with the high-collared shirt of shimmery black silk, one of her favorites. And the gray slacks with the razor sharp crease.

“Except for the guide,” she said, a tone in her voice that made Frank look up. Then, “Some of them are nice enough. Emily cracks me up the way she’s always talking into her video camera.”

“Yeah, and old Dardley, the cowboy sage, and Bernice Weiser with her questions, and Toddy whatshisname. He walks around like he’s made another mistake in a life of mistakes.”

Frank could wax loquacious in the dismissive mode.

“We’ll be like that some day.”

“Not me, sweetheart.” He used his Bogart voice, a kind of verbal mask. “You know, live high...”

“And die young.” She had heard it all before. “Except, darling, you’re not that young, anymore, are you.” She went la di da on him, masking her own words, which were intended to forestall one of their scripted routines. Before it got morbid.

But he wasn’t listening. Rolling a joint, she could tell, hunched forward with his knees up. She poked her head through the netting. On the magazine, in the valley of his lap, he was sorting through the weed. “That didn’t take long. Where did you get it?”

“From George. A man of many parts.”

“Really?”

“He’s a big Elvis fan. Really into it.”

She let the netting fall. “Elvis. Jesus, we’ve corrupted everybody, haven’t we.”

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Frank shrugged. Frank took the world as it was, eyes unblinking as a cat's. He wanted to record the world, not change it, as he liked to say. She fretted her clothes. His meticulous rolling of a joint signaled love-making. And this time it left her on edge. Their sexual crutch. It did make it seem more real. But not in retrospect. As though, for all their lubricity and inventiveness, for all their exertions, they had little to show for it.

The match struck. She wanted to demur, but the sweetish reek, an amorous incense, charged the air, the effect Pavlovian, provoking the old rush of love, like something remembered and then revived.

She parted the netting and took the proffered coil of paper and dope. Frank, head propped in a hand, was lying naked in languid arousal. She smiled. Her man. Her Pan with a smooth, ruddy complexion that went with the dark copious hair falling past his jaw, with the eyebrows, thick and very fine, nearly joining over the nose, which had large, shapely nostrils slightly turned up. He struck her then as sensual and refined, strong and fragile, with the aura of someone who could shatter and be shattered. "Just one," she said, inhaling and holding it, a balloon starting in her brain. Then an inner giggle as she handed it back to him and easily, mindlessly, took off her clothes.

"God, that's powerful," she said. "I feel like one big nipple." Her giggle escaped, making him frown. Lust was serious business. But his tongue made her smile at a private joke of no figuration having to do with the sublime and the ridiculous, one more than the other.

"So tell me," he said presently, his voice tremulous, "do you fancy the guide? As the British say." He was back along side her now, pushing up on the bed, making himself convenient. Appetizers, he called what they were doing, though sometimes they made it the main course.

"Mother told me never to speak with my mouth full." A standing joke. Mostly she didn't want this time to indulge Frank's turgid fantasies. Dream the fantasy, he would say, then live it, then record it, camera and strobe and remote release. Tableaux in black and white. The eroticism of beauty. And the object, beyond satiation, which never quite arrived? Art, of course.

Frank did not smile. He stroked her brilliant hair. "You could be doing... this... to him now."

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She lifted up. "Or you could."

"I could."

She eased herself on to him, propped on her hands, in the saddle, posting. "I think you fancy him, as the British say."

"He was on my case. About the walkabout."

"That's his job."

"And this," he said, breathy again, moving her under him, Father Frank, the missionary, "is my job."

He brought her close, denied her, close again and then again, until there was no denying her. She closed her eyes, and in the center of her widening pleasure, she saw again the fire finches. They moved in the wet verdure of the lawn, the light picking them out like little living flames that lifted up, one and then another and another, lifting in the light into the suddenly brimming sun.

They lay side-by-side, sated if not quite satisfied. Frank rootled for a Benson & Hedges. "So did you fancy him doing you?"

"Not really."

"What did you think about?" He inhaled and handed her the cigarette.

"Something special."

"Tell me."

"I don't really want to."

Frank nodded.

"Did you think about him?" she asked.

He took the cigarette back from her, inhaled, and stubbed it out in an ashtray on the night table. "I did actually."

"Tell me."

"You won't tell me."

"I'll tell if you'll tell."

But Frank, who had the gift of easy sleep, was already fading. Which she welcomed, she had to admit. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts. Of the guide. Of what secret worlds he might show her. What was the phrase he used? Reproductive fitness. Frank had laughed when she told him. Sounds like a workout for sex athletes. Maybe because Frank was out of that game. Shooting blanks. She could feel them in her now, down her inner thighs. Lots of blanks, but still blanks.

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But the guide. Nick. Even with that nose he was what you would call a hunk. Those shoulders that would hover over her. But what intrigued her was his restrained but unmistakable attraction to her, one overlain with a dutifulness that in itself was subordinate to some other, more central preoccupation. It piqued her vanity. Julia Roberts had been compared favorably to her.

So she let herself dream, bask in his dove colored eyes, which were alert and wary with some vulnerability she might assuage, if only with words. And those fire finches. Again. This time out of focus, out of place, on the lawn off the back deck with the brushy hills and the Pacific, a fading blue to blue where, to the sound of rain, she drifted.

The Rich-Combers arrived as from another planet to the welcoming dinner, making the rest of them, spruced up and all, seem a bit dowdy. Marlene wore her riding jacket, the more chic for being a bit shopworn, the gray slacks, and sandals with elevated heels. But she decided on a lilac button-down oxford shirt instead of the black silk. She would save that for later. It was her clothes and the way she wore them, careless of her elegance, that made the group, standing around with their drinks, all hush for a moment. Or perhaps it was Frank, sockless in loafers, maroon linen jacket over beige shirt and white trousers. His smooth face seemed almost polished and he had his dark hair tied back in a short ponytail. His faint sardonic smile suggested something feral, a satyr in his prime. Hip was the word Nick Mercer thought of. Hip was Frank Combers, but not in the least aloof as he took a drink and mingled.

They settled eventually into places at a table in the busy dining room, the Rich-Combers prized companions, the oldsters jostling to be near, paying tribute to relative youth and the glamour of real glamour. Marlene sat across from the guide a few places down, her back to a folksy mural of idealized native life with snow-capped Kilimanjaro looming in the background. Nick had Bernice Weiser on his left and a brightly chatty Emily Tice on his right. Directly across was Marsh Dardley, a big, jowly man, smoothly, robustly bald except for a silvery fringe curling back over jugged ears. He wore a leather vest, cowboy shirt, string tie with an ornate turquoise clip. No less ostensibly, he wore

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his voice, a down-home southwestern bass, with which he made sallies about poaching and population.

Otherwise the table talk limped along about jet lag and how much sleep people got that day. It perked up with the food. Marie Dardley wanted the recipe for the peanut soup, the quality of which sustained the conversation until the bowls emptied. Much praised were the pan fried tilapia, the curried lamb, and the array of breads brought to them by deft waiters.

Nick found himself glancing in the direction of Marlene Rich. Not quite surreptitiously. She reminded him of something that had slipped his mind. Yes, he was agreeing with Marie Dardley, impersonating a version of himself possessed of social skills, the banana stew was interesting. He remarked how bananas constitute much of the local diet, being easy to grow and nutritious. If somewhat bland. He looked down at his plate. He doubted the spiced mutton came from a sheep. He glanced again in the direction of the younger woman.

It was the way Marlene had pulled her hair back and up forties style in a barrette, exposing an elegant throat and translucent ears hung with sterling earrings fashioned like flying birds. The way her fine straight nose had a little groove on the tip. The way she had a touch of Nefertiti to her eyes, which had some faint, alluring sadness about them as she listened to more than spoke with Joyce Waddell and the doctor.

Her casual elegance made him aware of his own clothes. He would have to do something about them. Get a real jacket, one of those microfiber things you can pack in a duffel. A couple of decent shirts. Oxford. Buttondown. A tie?

While maintaining the appearance of interest in what was being said to him by the learned counsel, Nick changed the subject in his mind, lapsing into his background obsession, as his sister Stephanie had called it. The dig at Laetoli. There had to be fossils there. In those places where recent erosion had worn away the surface cover. In those veins of smooth pebbles that indicated old stream beds. And Klember had been more than apologetic. I was depending on you, Nick, he had said. You should have phoned. A real balls-up.

For her part, Marlene, mindful of the Nick's not quite surreptitious attention, found herself at the theater. Or at least some kind of road show.

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Maybe it was the guide's jacket, not quite bush, some sort of *après chasse* thing with a couple too many tabs. He had to look the part, after all.

And play the part, rapping his glass as the coffee came around. She held her applause as he stood up, cleared his throat, and welcomed them to what was sure to be a memorable safari. *Safari* being, of course, the Kiswahili word for journey and all that implies. He introduced himself officially, lapsing, she noticed, into brochure talk. Nick Mercer, your naturalist guide for your Tanzania wildlife safari. He then launched into a variation of what she took to be his standard spiel: They were not to settle for the obvious, for the big game, but would enjoy as well the birds, the flowers and the butterflies - the chamber music of nature. They would attend to both tonnage and plumage. He cued their smiles and changed key. They would take the measure of the whole environment, that is, how the animals, vegetation, land and climate interrelated. They would explore the underlying geology of this volcanic, starkly beautiful, restless landscape and its part in the evolution of humankind. "This is, after all, where we came from."

Well, it had worked before. Only now, taking in the nods and murmurs of appreciation, he remarked the Rich-Combers regarding him closely, as though they had just been whispering about him. Frank's expression was good-naturedly if bluntly appraising. Marlene had curved her mouth in sympathy, but her eyes were mischievous. As though he were transparent to her.

Nick concluded his own performance rather abruptly and directed their attention to another member of the touring company, one with more than a walk-on role. George Mollel, Nick declared, was gifted with clairvoyance where it came to spotting wildlife, a regular magic act. And he was known throughout Tanzania if not East Africa for his tee-shirt collection, to which he gratefully accepted contributions.

To mild clapping George of the Maasai rose from his chair. His high-pated, finely featured moon face flashed with toothsome brilliance as he bowed and opened his jacket, turning left and then right to show off the tee-shirt stretched over his muscular chest. It bore the insignia and crest of the Montreal Canadiens. But George, whose pleasure in performing couldn't have been faked and whose shaky English had an

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endearing quality about it, said he was really a fan of the New York Rangers. Which got a good laugh. What about the Islanders? There was more laughter. The ice, thin enough, had been broken.

Nick the emcee, mike figuratively in hand, thanked George and moved on to introduce “my good friend Yonah Ganetu. Yonah and I have done many of these trips together... And we haven’t lost anyone yet.” Which provoked mild laughter. “I should tell you that Yonah is a Beta Yisreal from Ethiopia and as such is directly descended from Solomon and Sheba even though he is, through his marriage to Edith, an honorary member of the Kikuyu tribe and a member of the Anglican Communion. He is known far and wide as the Lion of Judah. He is *the* paramount chief of our very real if temporary little tribe. Yonah is he who must be obeyed.” Another glass of wine, and he might have anointed Yonah their spiritual leader.

Was it mild derision or over-acting, Marlene would have wondered had she not detected the fond and even filial note in the guide’s voice. Indeed, she found herself nudged with admiration and a touch of envy. She might covet that kind of fondness, some bond transcending the vagaries of the flesh.

Their real chief then, a personage of large and quiet presence, impervious to anything remotely derisive in the guide’s introduction, restored some of the earlier chill when he rose to speak. The color of milk chocolate, Yonah had righteous eyes, a Roman nose, and a balding, bulbous forehead. The disdainful chin tufted with graying, kinked hair made him look like a seer. He spoke his words distinctly and stiffly, as though from a distance, his English from a book and the BBC. He was in his sixties and might have been more a professor than a driver in his gray brown tweed jacket and plaid tie.

His tall gauntness dominated the table and he was not above a little theater himself as he laid down the law in an English, the more foreign for being perfect. He welcomed them to Tanzania, to Africa. He told them it was a beautiful place and that they were going to see many beautiful things. “But like many beautiful things, Africa can be very dangerous. There are things you can do and things you must not do under any circumstances.”

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Nick's inadvertent glance in the direction of Marlene Rich found her looking directly at him. Then a smile, like a wag of the finger. What, he wondered? The danger of beautiful things? More than beautiful. He looked away, smitten. It wasn't just Marlene. The Rich-Combers had a silken ease about them, an effortless grace, as though they embodied some unconscious ideal, one to which he might aspire.

The Lion of Judah growled, but softly. A dark Moses come down from the mountain with his tablet of do's and don'ts. Mostly don'ts. Don't get out of the vehicle without permission. Don't wander off into the bush by yourself. Don't go outside the perimeters at the lodges and campsites. He went on about safari decorum, his articulate hands consonant with the angular ebony statuary placed around the room, his presence merging with the black night outside the mirroring windows.

Joyce Waddell stood to say some words about the Finchley Museum and its travel program. She read from notecards and smiled at odd times, as though reminding herself to. She said, "While enjoying all the animals and scenery, we shouldn't forget the rich variety of people who live here, especially the Maasai." She reviewed her credentials as an anthropologist. She looked the part in an attractive shirt dress of light chino, tabbed and belted for the outdoors and topped with a rakishly flaring bandanna scarf. She described at some length a course she taught at the museum school, to which she invited them all to attend. She remembered to smile. She cleared her throat. She shuffled her notecards. "I first came to Maasailand in 1984..." and went on in some detail about her previous visits to Tanzania and Kenya.

There were yawns. Nick gestured to one of the waiters for another round. A nightcap, he whispered to inquiring looks, on the house. He had vague notions of a less formal get together, around the campfire, so to speak. But when Professor Waddell finally sat down, Frank Combers took his Safari lager in one hand and his wife in the other and went out into the cool highland night. The Whipples left also.

The guide ended up in the lounge in front of a smoking fire in the massive stone fireplace between Bernice who, in one ear, was asking about AIDS in Africa, and Marsh who, in the other ear, was making creationist noises.

2

The town of Arusha, populated with more than its share of the damned, provided a whiff of the hellish on the rough road to paradise. To buy bottled water and to fix the older of the two Land Rovers, which had limped and coughed most of the way from the lodge, they had pulled up amid the ramshackle squat buildings of eroded cement, next to the heaved paving teeming with the poor and their litter.

Even as the word scabrous came to mind, Nick Mercer nursed a soft spot for this sad parody of urban space. Angela Kirkland lived and worked here, going into the flyblown shops, opening up even the shuttered faces of the Indian merchants. She made people smile. She made people better. They still asked him to say hello to “Sister Angel” for them.

On the way in they had passed Christ Church Cathedral, a modest stone building, and a bungalow dubbed "the vicarage," where The Reverend Nichols had a generous hand with his “Episcopal whiskey” in the after hours of the various teas, dinners, and other parish occasions to which Nick and Angela had been invited. The Reverend, who was attached to the cathedral, could hold his whiskey and argue the larger ponderables with quiet incisiveness. The man of God and the man of science would ramble on about all sorts of stuff after the others had left and while Angela read a book off by herself or provided an audience each of the males sought to impress.

Rupert was a man of medium stature with a fresh face and shag of dark hair that made him appear too young to be what he was. He had a gift for listening, which he did with an attentive intensity one didn't realize until afterwards. He had more questions than opinions, and his silences might have felt like judgments were it not for the soft brown gaze of his eyes.

Nick remembered those eyes when Angela announced that she was leaving him for the Reverend Nichols. It came in the wake of a prolonged absence on Nick's part, a dig in Afar during which her letters dwindled to perfunctory communications. Her welcome kiss at Kilimanjaro Airport had been cool, her body tented away from his. Then those ominous words: “Nick, I have something to tell you.”

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He thought he should have seen it coming, even though in retrospect the end of their affair still surprised him. You don't expect men of the cloth to covet their neighbor's girlfriend, much less make off with her. It did nothing for his pride of intelligence that it had happened right under his nose. Now he could see that that the Reverend Rupert Nichols and Sister Angela Kirkland shared far more than did she and the hominidian N. Mercer. They more than believed: they bore witness to what they believed with their lives and their work.

He shifted restlessly in his front seat and glanced around, anxious to get going. Downtown Arusha presented itself as a place of some occasion that time of morning. Safari vehicles of various descriptions - one or two zebra-striped, some loaded to the gunwales with gear - came and went with their camera-hung passengers dressed for the bush. Tenacious young locals hawked maps, nature guides, and curios, including formidable-looking Maasai spears.

Yonah Ganetu had led his flock into the best local hotel to be briefed, mostly about tipping, by Rob Carlson, Cromwell & Fitch's man in Arusha. George had raised the bonnet of the ailing Rover, found a hair-line fracture in the distributor cap and gone in search of a replacement. The guide chatted for a while with gangling Dirk Wilkers, who was deutsching his contingent of ruddy Germans. Then he bent over the crippled vehicle, wondering where he might find a replacement, and otherwise mentally juggling the day's schedule in the event they were delayed.

It didn't help matters when the group returned earlier than expected from the hotel. They milled around, their beamish curiosity visibly ebbing in the face of squalor too real to be picturesque. Toddy Krammer, pale of face, retired into the far back seat of George's Rover. Earlier, at the lodge, Joyce Waddell had informed the guide that Mr. Krammer wasn't feeling well, that breakfast had been taken to his cold-water rondavel.

Indeed, Ms. Waddell had bustled about mightily as they loaded up in the parking lot of the lodge. Clipboard in hand, obliviously officious, her smile sugary, her voice teacherly, she worked at justifying her existence among them. She seemed a harmless enough nuisance until she approached Nick and said, "I know the boys will want to keep the same

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people in their jeeps for the whole safari, but we really can't have that. I know they'll want to do it to build up loyalty and get better tips." Her smile, never very real, had arranged itself into a frown as she let the guide know she had been around the track, knew the tricks.

Like Mr. Krammer, Dr. Waddell brought out the mock-Brit in Vermont-born Nicholas Mercer. It was a persona comprising a facade of rectitude and puzzled disdain that usually kept at bay the more captious and importuning types. He smiled through gritted teeth. "Actually, Joyce" he said, as though confiding in her, "that's not my bailiwick. Yonah takes care of pax safety, vehicle assignments and that sort of thing. I do the nature stuff. Take it up with Yonah, if you want. But I wouldn't refer to him as a boy, at least not to his face." In her case, he relied on a kind of compensatory deference if not outright timidity a lot of Americans showed around black Africans.

Now, the clipboard at least figuratively in hand, her signature scarf flaring to one side of her olive safari vest, her fatigue trousers a tad too tight, the tour escort approached him again. "Do you know how much longer?"

"Hard to tell."

"What are we waiting for?"

"A part."

"Aren't there... stores?"

"Of a sorts. Mind you, we're not in Connecticut. Or Nairobi, for that matter."

She sighed and walked off, satisfied with her exasperation.

Askance, ever aware, Yonah took in their exchange. He bared his rich upper teeth and his eyes gleamed. He left the *Mzungi* to the *Mzungi*. Mostly he stood back, keeping an eye on those members of the party who had not climbed back into the Rovers. A shepherd. Though with people, especially Americans, it was like herding cats.

Discontent had begun to settle on the faces of the less self-sufficient among them, making them restive, when George, bare-chested under his jacket, full-moon face brilliant with smile, came triumphantly around the corner brandishing a shiny new distributor cap. It had cost F&C a small wad of American dollar bills and George his LA Lakers tee

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shirt. Which didn't matter. To general celebration, George, "you bloody genius," had the engine humming under the upraised bonnet.

Except now there was no Frank to be found. Rounded up earlier with the others, he had slipped away while they fiddled with the engine. Nick swore more or less audibly. The escort put on her look and emerged from the vehicle to take charge. Yonah walked off to find the photographer. Nick looked at his watch, as though he might propitiate time, which had its own agenda. Frank. But then the high-end clients could be thoughtless even, perhaps especially, when it came to each other.

They did appear eventually, Frank in custody and carrying a wicked-looking spear. Yonah didn't want to let him keep the thing, but George took it and packed it on top with the extra luggage.

Marlene Rich assumed the seat directly behind the guide, who sat next to Yonah. At the lodge she had said she wanted to ride with him because she hadn't brought binoculars. She was relying on the kindness of someone no longer quite a stranger. She had been direct. She had found from living with Frank that you could get most anything simply by asking for it. Or taking it. Of course, as he pointed out to her, you had to want it as well. So she had flattered the guide in telling him the truth: she wanted to see what he saw. If her attentions stopped short of flirtation it was to avoid the kind of familiarization that smacked of patronizing and the acknowledgment that, however exalted, guides belonged to that large genera of hired hands with whom liberties could be taken. At the same time, she wanted to be something more than another paying customer.

Her presence had a tempting proximity for Nick as they bounced along the pocked road leading out of the town center. He felt he could lean back into her horsewoman's aura, as he imagined it, of worked leather and firm loins. Or, more immediately, into her smile and the faint, heady musk rising from her exposed throat. If he indulged his fancies, it was with the awareness that she was a married woman with a husband in tow.

So he governed his fantasies as they jounced though the bustling shantytown that sprawled in all directions. This was where most of black Africa lived, a realm of fetid, trash-strewn ditches, dusty lanes leading

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back to banana trees, garden patches, tethered goats, scratching chickens, tumbled down and patched up shacks. And always people and more people. At a distance, during the rainy season when it greened, you might think it bucolic.

It was the Africa Sister Angela Kirkland had engaged and that Nick Mercer avoided. A Florence Nightingale without the cape, more like bush jacket, hiking boots, and knapsack of nostrums, she had gone into those places, visiting people too sick to come to the clinic. She never came back quite in one piece, each time quaking with some new *horreur du jour*. The malnourished kids were the least of it. (What bloody good are medicines when they don't even have enough to eat? she would rant at him. What good are medicines when they throw them out and go to the witch doctor?) AIDS, of course, and tuberculosis and malaria and diseases, she swore, waiting to be named.

On a couple of occasions, Nick had driven her northwest of Arusha to visit some Maasai *bomas* scattered on the eroded, gameless plain. No litter there, it was true, the poverty stark, nearly good enough for Kodak, the conical, mud-daubed structures, some with wooden doors, being upscale versions of the more rudimentary huts out in the bush. They had arrived on one visit to find an ancient man, toothless, privates on display, squatting placidly in the dust - dust that would soon claim him by way of the ravening hyenas, to which the Maasai consigned their dead.

Angela had come for the children, to tend their afflicted eyes. She had taken the babes and toddlers on her lap, and with gentle patience cleaned and daubed their inner lids and canthi with antiseptic salve. She wheedled the impassive mothers to watch and learn how to take care of their children. She showed them how it was done, leaving them supplies, knowing they wouldn't get used. The women were more interested in the bits of wrapped hard candy and other stuff she had brought along as bribes.

"You don't really care, do you, Nick?" she had accused, working her hands with an alcohol wipe on the ride back.

"If I thought it could help," he had said, echoing her own doubts.

"But we do." She had not sounded convincing, least of all to herself. She might have envied his apparent self-honesty.

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“I am not Christian enough to care for people more than they care for themselves.”

“Christian enough? Frankly, Nick, I’ve never thought of you as any kind of Christian.”

He had missed the threat that her words conveyed. On another occasion, during one of his whiskey chats with the Reverend Nichols, he had argued that you could hardly be a Christian if you didn’t believe in God. It was a topic regarding which Nick had to watch a tendency to talk down to the minister and the ministering Angela. Darwin, he had patiently explained, didn’t so much dispense with the reality of God as with the necessity of an attending creator.

Angela had sulked on the ride back from the bomas. He had tried to mollify her. He had confessed to being an unfeeling cad. He had wanted to get back to the Mount Meru where he had taken a room for the night. She could, in a fit of pique and bad conscience, stomp off to the nurses’ compound and her little cubicle of a room where any lovemaking might as well have been in public.

In the face of the human disaster that was Africa, the best Nick could summon was a tragic mode, keeping at bay the inner shrug of callousness, at the same time trying to make it more than an excuse for doing nothing himself. To him it was a mystery, not his own withdrawal from misery, but the attempt at its alleviation by others. For all the theoretical underpinning he found for it in sociobiology, he could not grasp altruism.

He had erected other barriers as well. You project your own sensibilities onto others. You wonder why they don’t act and react like responsible middle class citizens who keep their children clean and pick up the garbage from underfoot. But they don’t. You think they suffer as you suffer and perhaps they do. But it’s a suffering that merely leads to more suffering. It can make you despair if you think about it enough. It can drive you mad.

In self-defense, he might rail inwardly or talk in low tones to other non-locals about the culture of beggary and extortion that pervaded black Africa. Daily the well-dressed functionaries of the Tanzanian government lunched with pale Europeans, talking them out of roads, hospitals, schools, power systems, or plain old cash, the easier for

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spiriting out of the country to the cold vaults of Switzerland. A continent of beggars and shake down artists. If the roads had shoulders it was room for the cars and lorries pulled over by the impeccably uniformed swarm of officials extracting payment from the poor sods actually working for a living. The cynicism bit deep, afflicted all but the most Godly.

Not that Nick didn't admire people who tried to do something - the Peace Corps and NGO types, the missionaries, the USAID field workers, the locals like Edith Ganetu, Yonah's wife. He admired and resented them because, if nothing else, they carried the moral burden for people like himself. He had turned away from the disease and squalor as endless and hopeless, something he could do nothing to alleviate. Indeed, he scarcely let himself think about it, if only because his thoughts grew so darkly Darwinian.

Nick Mercer could not keep racial explanations entirely at bay. Innate abilities or lack thereof would explain a lot. The word primitive in its negative connotations might apply. We are all modified African apes, some of us, perhaps, more modified than others.

But what his head might grant, his heart denied. You couldn't just lump people together and dismiss them. His grandmother Margaret Mercer, *née* Craughwell, had told him of the boglands of Roscommon when she was but a wee thing. "It was only desperate." The blue eyes still young in a face of smooth wrinkles, her dentures not quite secure. "Five to a bed if there was a bed. No shoes and the fat cows going to England for nothing. People don't know what poor is." Now the Green Tiger. But Nick could not, quite yet, believe in the advent of a Black Lion.

They drove. The shanties gave way to savanna dotted with Maasai bomas and herds of scrawny cattle and goats tended by kids. George, in the lead, pushed his reinvigorated vehicle at a withering clip. They might have made the run to Tarangire in record time but for a pit stop for Toddy Krammer, who was not doing well. Near the village of Kwa Kuchinja they turned off onto a gravel road and came presently to the park entrance. Yonah went in to pay the fees, a procedure never quite routine. George, sporting a tee-shirt from the Hard Rock Cafe, Jerusalem, pointed Toddy to the restrooms while the rest of them stretched their legs and admired a flock of yellow-collared lovebirds.

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With the best seat in the house, Marlene Rich reserved judgment as the main event got under way, as the gates opened and as, at a reverential pace and with the tops of the Rovers down, they drove into what was billed as picture book Africa. It was dusty. The sun had waxed closer and hotter. And the flies were businesslike in their attentions. It would take an effort.

Not very much as it turned out. Marlene's resistance broke with an emotional force that surprised her as they followed the track south along the Tarangire River through a sandy parkland of savanna and shrub and *A. tortilis*, the umbrella acacia. The spreading, corkscrewing limbs, delicate foliage, and over-arching form of the trees framed and filled the vistas, a Japanese print come to life. Against the cloudless sky a bateleur eagle soared, wings tipping, as though walking a tightrope. In a stretch of open land, zebra and wildebeest grazed together.

She felt a flush of old-fashioned infatuation, a crush on the hapless guide, as though he, on alert, watching with an intensity she found provocative, had conjured all this for her. She wanted to reach out and touch the back of his neck, where he might be vulnerable. She wanted to pat him, like one of her horses. She wanted to whisper to him about the fire finches. She had to staunch her impulses, if only because she wasn't sure she wanted him unless he remained, in the tabbed shirt and behind his intent gaze, inviolate.

The inviolate guide turned to his audience in their Rover, which had been elongated to accommodate two extra seats. To Marlene and Emily Tice beside her and to the Dardleys and the Weisers farther back, he explained how the uniform height of the lower branches of the acacias resulted from the upward browsing of giraffes.

"Like an upside down pasture," said Marie. She was a pleasant woman with abundant white hair and alert dark eyes that took in all the things she was writing down in a compact journal.

In another expanse of meadow a ways on, impala and gazelles spirited away from the dirt track. "Thomson gazelles," said the guide. "You can call them Tommies, which shows you're an old Africa hand."

Which made Marlene smile at him. "Is that what you are?"

"I will be if I'm not careful." Her attention pleased him.

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They stopped to look at a lilac breasted roller perched on a sodom apple. The bird might have been aware of its dazzling pink purple, aquamarine, tawny brown coloring. They were all standing up now, applauding with their clicking and whirring cameras. The guide again invested Marlene with the binoculars, leaned over and helped her focus on the jay-sized bird.

“Do you ever get tired of it?” she asked. She lowered the glasses to let him see her.

“What’s that?”

“The beauty?”

The quickening in his eyes gratified her.

“No, but I take it for granted. Or I think about it in other ways.”

She waited.

“I ask myself, what’s it for?”

“Does it need a reason?”

Which caught him off guard. “In evolutionary theory...” He trailed off, having glimpsed a larger world beyond that which encompassed his own.

They saw a herd of fringe-eared oryx, but at a distance. Closer were homely kongoni, an antelope with the face of a horse, the ears of a cow, and ridged horns growing back from the top of its head in the shape of a lyre. Yonah pointed out a ground hornbill, a red-wattled bird resembling a turkey.

In orchard-like dalbergia woodland, they surprised several eland, which disappeared like shadows into the mottled shade of the blackwood trees. “They are shy from poaching,” said Yonah, as though apologizing for the flightiness of the giant antelopes.

Marsh mentioned how someone back home ranced them. “Supposed to be good eating.”

In a meadow, set back, a herd of giraffes surreally browsed the upper branches of a line of acacias.

“Those are browsers,” proposed Marie Dardley, prompting the guide. She had been to Africa before. “But do they graze sometimes?”

They had stopped and they were standing again, as though in tribute.

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“Sometimes,” Nick said, “they spread their front legs or kneel, but it leaves them exposed to predators. Mostly lions. Lions take a lot of the younger giraffes.”

He took his glasses from Marlene and raised them to his eyes. “You can see how the lips and tongue have adapted to nibble the foliage around the long thorns.” He gave back the binoculars. “In fact you could say that the entire shape of the giraffe is a function of the acacia tree. Evolution is creative by default. The giraffe exists because there is a niche for it to fill.”

“But what about the acacia tree itself?” Mrs. Dardley was taking notes.

“I’m not really sure. Soil and climate. A botanist could tell you. But you’re right. Its thorns are obviously a response to herbivores.” He covered the lapse no one noticed and went on. “Evolution is a dense, interconnected web. The gazelle and the cheetah are functions of each other.”

When they stopped again, pulling up behind the other Rover, it was to look at an old bull elephant just beyond a baobab tree. Belly deep in dry grass, the great beast was twisting up staves of it with his trunk and stuffing them into his seemingly modest mouth.

“It looks just like a giant rubber plant,” the Widow Tice said to her prospective audience, aiming her camera at the tree.

The guide grew preoccupied. His audience had risen again. “Watch. He’ll ignore us for a about a minute or two. Then he’ll start to get irritated, just like you would if someone stopped to stare at you. Watch his eyes.”

The animal followed the script. He started ripping at the grass. He snorted. He stared back, giving them the hairy eye-ball.

They moved on to watch at a more respectful distance. Nick was at the lectern. “Elephants are exquisitely intelligent. And that poses a problem for evolutionary theorists...” He waited for their attention. “...in that they are several magnitudes more intelligent than other large herbivores. Antelopes, rhino, zebra, buffalo, they’re all pretty dumb. The question is why.”

He spoke to Marlene and past her, past the others in the back, to some audience that may have been only a version of himself.

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“Well, they have a larger brain,” Marie Dardley offered.

“Okay, but why do they have a larger brain?”

“It is perhaps the neurological network that is necessary for controlling its trunk.” Dr. Weiser sounded like he had heard it before.

“Right. There are more than sixty thousand muscles in the trunk alone. So it ends up with all this extra circuitry that, in a stand-by mode, so to speak, gets used for thinking. Nature inclines to multifunctioning. I’m not sure it’s something we can really prove, but it may have something to do with our own evolution.”

Their quizzical expressions, the beginning, perhaps, of boredom, merely incited the guide. Conscious of Yonah beside him and, at best, his tolerance for talk about human evolution, he began, “when we started walking upright, okay, we freed up hands to carry things, food, stones, sticks, clubs. That led to making things. Now that requires very precise hand-eye coordination. That meant more neurological circuits, especially in the hands, and more seemingly extraneous gray matter in the stand-by mode. Of course, the big question remains: why did we become bipedal in the first place?”

Marlene watched him intently, covetous of his preoccupation, which by its very nature excluded her. She could see herself as the focus of that voice and those eyes, the way she was the object of Frank’s various importuning lenses.

They returned soon enough to the mundane. They bumped along. The Weisers gently bullied each other, mostly Bernice nagging her husband about the pictures that he laboriously took with an ancient Leica. Did you get the elephant next to the tree, dear? Yes. I got the elephant next to the tree.

Emily chirped for a while into her device. Then laid it aside.

Old Dardley farted, but softly, as though to himself.

George, ahead of them, pulled over. His hand pointed in the direction of a termite mound about ten yards off the track. There seemed little to look at until Yonah found them the cheetah lying nearly invisible in the high grass. Her mottled form once seen was unmistakable just behind the eight-foot excrescence of raw earth. Still, there was not much to discern until two cubs came gamboling around in front, stopped, one of them to lick its paw, then skittered back to their mother. Emily

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whispered breathlessly to her machine and the other cameras wound and snapped to ooohs and aaahs. In the other vehicle Frank Combers leaned far over through the open roof, cranking and firing his big camera. The cubs appeared once more, as though making an encore. Then the mother cat, big-boned, stately, led them off into the bush.

So they arrived at the tented lodge in a state of happy excitement. George beamed to a round of applause. The Whipples presented him with a tee-shirt on which a brightly colored macaw was ballooning something in Spanish about birding in Venezuela.

Porters appeared from the main building of mortared stone, and there followed a confusion of baggage and tent numbers in the dust and sunshine of the parking lot. Mahogany mace in hand, the Lion sorted things out, back and forth in English and Kiswahili with the porters.

Bernice Weiser, wig askew, leaned on her cane, her hand reaching out to Marie Dardley in exclamation. "Marie, did you see those cubs! I mean we could have picked them up!"

The sighting had left Frank Combers flushed and a little breathless. "I think I got what I wanted," he was saying to Stan Whipple, whose own enthusiasm showed as tolerance for Frank's excitement.

The museum escort flashed smiles all around, pleased that they were all pleased.

Except for Toddy, slumped grim and gray against the wall.

Emily relentlessly recorded with her video camera, which she held up to her face like a prosthetic eye. Voice over, she narrated the obvious. She caught Marlene Rich as she flicked her hand out to touch the guide on the wrist, her smile admiring, flirtatious, and oddly vulnerable behind dark sunglasses. "But you've seen it all, haven't you, Nick?"

Seen it all? Was she mocking him? Teasing him? Admiring him? The way she voiced his name, dropping and softening her voice, unstrung him, left him reduced to a feeble, "I guess I have." As she flounced away, following the porter with her bags.

There were complications. The office in Arusha had over-booked Tarangire. The assistant manager, a smiling, fat Wameru in an ill-fitting suit and bulging eyes behind thick glasses, produced the requisition form. Dirk Wilkers had arrived earlier with three vans of Germans.

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The Weisers would have to wait for theirs. Things were uncertain. Nick said no, the Weisers would not wait. They would take his tent and he, if necessary, would bunk in with the drivers in accommodations more modest but perfectly adequate for him. Well, said the assistant manager smiling, it wasn't that simple. Yes it was, said Nick, playing the *bwana*. Standard operating procedure, he told the Weisers, who protested, who wouldn't think of taking his tent. Nonsense, he said and sent them along with their luggage.

At the same time Nick did want a tent of his own. He wanted solitude, a monkish retreat the better to propitiate the gods of evolutionary theory, who might bestow on him visions of the creation. It took some wrangling. Pale palms were opened, at first in apparent helplessness. And finally, after intricate negotiations involving the summoning of junior staff, the shuffling of papers, and the offices of Yonah Ganetu, the real *bwana*, and in appreciative acceptance of necessary fees and reasonable supplemental considerations, arrangements were arranged.

N. Mercer, for the guide had risen or lapsed into his heuristic persona, considered skipping lunch, which by then was mostly over. He managed to scrounge a bowl of murky soup, a sandwich of sorts, and a cold beer. He found himself a place away from the others. He was restless with an inspiration of which he was scarcely conscious. An idea percolated at the edge of thought. Something he had seen. Something someone had said. A waiter went by carrying a tray of dirty dishes. An ape couldn't do that. Bernice, with her cane, couldn't do that. Except...

It took an effort to be civil when Joyce Waddell edged her way around tables towards him and plunked herself down without asking. He might have been sympathetic about her struggle with age - the turkey neck not quite concealed by the scarf, the make-up like cover-up, the weight sliding out of control, the silly safari hat. He certainly would have sympathized with her position as museum escort. Like him she had to mediate between her own world and that of the paying customers, who were, with their wealth and what it allowed them to presume, like a different species. She couldn't decide whether to treat him as a flunky and thereby maintain her place as a client; or whether to be one of the

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crew, which conferred a lower but more certain status. She may not have noticed how the wealthy can afford to be gracious and often are.

She began telling him with an eye-fluttering mixture of patronizing confidentiality and special beseechment - to make him understand that it was something affecting her personally - that Toddy had developed an intestinal upset of the worst kind. She kept her talk vague, skirting the more unpalatable details. Toddy was on the museum's board of directors, "one of our mainstays," and, the eyelids fluttering in an excess of eye-liner, "a fascinating person when you get to know him." So would he, Nick, she half asked, half ordered, the voice stiffening with an authority not quite confident, please check to see if he needs anything. "It's something I'd..."

Which made Nick affable and crude. "A bad case of the shits, huh?"

"Well. . ."

"Hey, it goes with the territory."

She was lifting from her chair. "But you will check on him?"

"I will consider it a great honor."

He doubted the sarcasm had registered. Not that he cared. He walked with musement down the line of tents, commodious, canvas things set under open thatched *bandas* on concrete foundations. Diarrhea did go with the territory, along with other forms of digestive distress. With enough cases it became a topic, an opportunity for casual intimacy that helped bond the group.

In the cool green light of his own tent he lingered, opened his duffel and looked around for what might serve as a desk. Number six, it was next to the Rich-Combers. He could hear Marlene talking. She was saying, "I know I packed the book Amy lent me." It was a voice he liked listening to. California mellow, worldly, with a touch of smoke and sadness. Looking for a book. Was she already bored?

Then Toddy. Nick stood outside of number ten, said "knock, knock," and heard from within a woeful moan. The interior smelled like a sick bay. In the bathroom behind a partition Mr. Krammer groaned.

"How are you doing?" The guide achieved in his voice a level of concern approaching sympathy.

There was a gaseous discharge. "Awful."

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“Do you want me to ask Martin Weiser to look in? He's a general internist. He might be able to help...”

“I know Martin,” the voice snapped. “Yes. Maybe. Later.”

“Have you seen any blood?”

Another moan. “I don't think so.”

Another discharge, a rustle of toilet paper, a flush. Toddy emerged looking like someone recently exhumed. He sat on the edge of the camp bed and with effort found in one of his bags a can of room deodorant. He plumed the air with the gift shop scent of bayberry. He took a pill and swallowed water. “It's mostly a lot of gas.”

“Is there anything you need?”

“I don't think so.” The realtor lay back on the bed, still as a corpse, and closed his eyes. A small Sony radio blinked on the night table.

The guide refrained from mentioning it. He withdrew noiselessly, feeling sorry for the man, who was obviously too ill to enjoy his misery.

A half an hour later it came to him - the simple, fantastical, slightly absurd key to human evolution.

Concentration had not been easy. He found himself restless, trapped in his refuge, the gnats of various agitations swirling around. Marlene Rich and her husband could be heard a few feet and a couple of layers of canvas away. A whiff of marijuana had wafted over with the sound of a desultory conversation. He did not pay heed. He did not want to listen to them, but to himself, to his own thoughts, which were eddying around something significant, something about tool portability and bipedalism. How did we get off all fours?

They were walking upright in Laetoli. *Laetoli*. They would be laying out sections, scratching around, digging. Klember had been apologetic. Check with me after your group leaves. I'll leave word with the office. Back to Arusha in twelve. Pick up supplies. Then Laetoli and escape into the dry passions of excavation. Which moved him to take out his notes and to resume another kind of scratching.

But fretfully. The provisional title of his opus magnus made him wince. “Tool Portability and the Origins of Bipedality in Plio-Pleistocene Hominids” smacked of what it was - a rehash of the ideas of Adriaan Kortlandt. “Bipedalism, Tool Portability, and Proto-Warfare” looked

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better on paper. It daunted him. The sheer effort. Marshaling the ideas. Checking the details. Explaining the inconsistencies. Giving due credit to others. Especially to the work of Richard Alexander.

He picked up an index card and read in his own, just decipherable script: *Transitional arboreality, by providing a means of additional refuge, would have facilitated the gradual adaptation to tool carrying and the use of sticks and perhaps stones as effective weapons against large or pack predators. By using sticks as they adapted to the spreading savanna, the early australopithecines were taking the forest with them.*

But how? How do you get around the chicken-and-egg thing? They couldn't carry weapons effectively unless they were bipedal. They? We, he had to remind himself. What we were. A lot of what we are. So how did we become bipedal without carrying defensive tools insofar as transitional bipedality - especially transitional bipedality - would have hampered us, would have left us vulnerable to predators in the open savannas?

He tried to picture those small, ape-like creatures, naked like any wild animals, foraging out from tree cover in the midst of lions and leopards and hyenas.

An amorous growl reached him. Then Marlene's laugh, a chirruping sound that turned throaty. A low moan. Then louder. Mutterings. Then Frank, unabashedly in the throes, a crescendo of vocalizations that rose and fell and rose again. Relative quiet. Then a "hu, hu, hu, from Marlene. Then Frank again. Practically on stage.

The evolutionary theorist got up and paced. Making the beast with two backs. In that sickish excitement that attends the audition of other people's love or violence, he wondered if they were dorsoventral or ventroventral or combinations thereof? He listened to them, vicariously moved. He might have joined them, at a remove, were his arousal not edged with an envy bordering on pain. To make love in a warm tent after lunch. The freedom of intimacy that could descend like grace. All of which he had forsaken.

More practically, he wondered if he should alert them to their trans-sonority. Excuse me, folks, but everyone within a thirty-yard radius can hear you fucking. Ever resourceful, he brought out the compact cassette player with the small but powerful speakers his sister Stepanie

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had given him for Christmas. He thumbed among his choices as the amorous clamor continued unabated. A collection of operatic overtures, also from Stephanie, seemed a bit obvious as an aural deodorant. He put it on anyway, cranked it up.

The sounds of lovemaking abated. He was able to turn down the player but he could not subdue his own agitation. The bonding power of human sex. Owen Lovejoy's thesis, now quite discredited. But where did adultery, a preoccupation of *H. sapiens*, fit in? What was it selected for? A way of stirring the gene pool? Not putting all your eggs in one basket? Remnant of our promiscuous past? A way for males to propagate their genes at the expense of other males? Then mock adultery, flirtatious behavior. A form of threat, a way of testing the original bond, of reinforcing it? Or was it curiosity, that most human of attributes? What does someone else *feel* like?

He lit a cigarette and engaged a hovering, larger agitation. How did the transformation from all fours start? Outside his tent he heard Bernice talking loudly as her husband approached from the other direction. "I had a rest, dear. I was just coming. The Dardleys say they saw a snake." The doctor said he needed something back in their tent. He would meet her on the verandah. Through the screen of his tent flap Nick watched Mrs. Weiser go by, walking slowly, using her cane.

He dismissed the idea as a flit of fancy. Too obvious... Too absurd... Then ... Of course! *Those canny beasts didn't stroll sedately along like cultivated Europeans in a nineteenth century novel. Instead they hobbled, slightly bent, a broken piece of thorn branch held in a power grip, but downwards, toward the ground, supporting them and ready to be used against any threatening sabertooth. Bipedality arose when proto-hominids started using sticks simultaneously for upright walking and as defensive weapons. Between quadrupedalism and bipedalism was tripedalism.*

An ape with a walking stick? Notions seemingly as far-fetched had proved valid.

N. Mercer scribbled ideas, amanuensis to an impatient muse. "Stick-walking" as he called it, *would have started with an individual dragging a stick or piece of branch for protection while crossing a clearing and finding that he or she could carry it better by using it to*

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walk upright. Others would have copied. Cultural transmission occurs among apes, even among monkeys. Stick-walking would have allowed that troop to venture farther out into the savanna, increasing the habitable range and food supply and therefore the reproductive fitness of its members. A predisposition for bipedal walking, at first random, would have been selected for. Depending on selection pressures, the time required for full, efficient bipedality could have been short in evolutionary terms, perhaps a hundred thousand years. The change would have spread rapidly, both culturally and genetically, giving a decided edge to the kind of proto-warfare observed among chimps in the wild. As speciation proceeded, arboreality would have become marginal, the trees a less necessary haven of safety.

He paused, not a little in awe of what he had done. This would show them. Them? Well, Angela Kirkland for one, though he could scarcely imagine anyone who might be less impressed, if, indeed, she ever got around to reading about it. What difference will it make if we do finally figure out our evolutionary past? she had asked him more than once.

Then perhaps Dr. Henry Mercer, who had wanted Nick to be the medical researcher he wanted to be. The doctor might be impressed by an actual book, one with a glossy jacket strung with endorsements. And even if he was impressed, he would leave any definitive affirmations unsaid, like so much else.

Then Alex McIssac, his thesis advisor. Professor McIssac would raise his bushy eyebrows and purse his thin lips, his approval qualified with questions about Nick's original thesis topic.

Standing up, Nick stretched, stripped, and pulled on a pair of swimming trunks. His fellow hominidians might be impressed enough to whet their critical knives for a go at his idea. Stick-walking? The ergonomics won't add up. Speculative at best. Just so stories. Because no one expected to dig up a troop of australopithecines standing stooped in stick-walking positions with fossilized sticks in their hands. In strata dated five million years old. Should check to make sure there were no stick holes evident in the Laetoli prints. Perhaps, only males used sticks. That might explain the small canines of australopithecine males. Clubs were used instead of teeth and fists to establish dominance within a

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troop. Which brought him back to ground and the work of enlarging and deepening his theory, getting ready to defend it.

He pulled on a long-sleeved shirt for protection against the sun and took a towel from the bathroom. His trunks felt tight under a slight swell, the start of a paunch. Had to watch it. Just a swim. Exercise being something else he needed to start doing.

On the wide verandah in front of the domed dining room, Yonah Ganetu held court for the Weisers and Emily Tice. He was suffering from what Edith called one of his spells. Someone must have mentioned South Africa. Because The Lion of Judah was leaning forward from the comfortable chair over the low table, his desert nose cleaving the air as he indulged a favorite bitter peeve - what he saw as the obsession of the western press with South Africa.

“Do you know, Doctor, that half a million blacks died in Uganda *after* that bloody tyrant Idi Amin was deposed. The western press said nothing about those people. The west is only interested if whites are involved. A black man's death in Africa is important only if a white man kills him. And when blacks kill blacks in Africa, the white man still likes to take the blame.”

The doctor, nodding vaguely at this torrent, offered to buy the guide a beer.

Nick said yes and pulled up a chair. Part of the job. Hang with the clients. And keep an eye on Yonah. He resisted an impulse to tell Bernice how she had inspired a breakthrough in the theory of human evolution. She might not understand, might think he was comparing her to early hominids.

“Look at Rwanda last year.” Yonah was back at full vehemence, oblivious to the video camera Emily aimed at them. “Our fault, says the white man. As though you are gods.”

It wasn't what most Americans expected to hear. Yonah, in his quiet tirades, could get impolitic. He would tell the white folks that their guilt was a form of pride, a profession of power.

Bernice leaned forward, touched the guide's elbow. “Nick, I mean isn't this view something?”

The panorama before them dipped into a wide ravine, then rose, a vista of open woodland, shrub and baobab where wildebeest and zebra

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grazed. At a perfect distance - close enough to see clearly, far enough away to be in another realm - a solitary bull elephant wallowed and hosed himself off in the remnant flow of the Tarangire River. Above them in the bleached sky vultures circled on the rising thermals.

“Yes,” he said, smiling at her, seeing it through her eyes.

His beer arrived and he lifted his glass in silent celebration. Stick walking. Why not? Lovejoy had the guys bringing home groceries. Not to mention the aquatic nonsense.

“At its worst, Doctor, the white government of South Africa was a model of moderation and fairness compared to the rest of Africa.” Yonah homed in on the impassive face of Dr. Weiser, his fellow Jew. “But white leftists don’t want to hear that. They hold the white government to much higher standards. All white governments. If that is not racism, then tell me, please, what is?”

“Easy, Yonah,” said Nick, back among his own species. “Remember what Edith said.”

“Why should I be easy. The truth is the truth.”

“White people also kill each other in large numbers,” said Dr. Weiser, who had his own sad truths.

The Ethiopian’s gold teeth gleamed. The Red Terror that had erupted around him in 1974. An anguish that never left him. The greatest danger was always other people. Never more so than here in Africa. But invoking Edith’s name did help him subside. *Calme-toi*, she would say, using her private school French when the inner storms began behind the raptor eyes. She made a merry matriarch, tutting on about what Dr. Pradesh had said, the high blood pressure, the pills his son sent from Canada. Then her laugh, subversive, as though her husband’s righteousness, under the circumstances, the African circumstances, was a form of futility.

Nick, distracted, ready for the water, for the coolness and after-glow of immersion, tarried, Edith’s deputy, until the talk turned from politics to the less venomous subject of snakes.

3

An aquamarine splash of Americana complete with bathhouse, waterslide, and padded lounge chairs, the pool at Tarangire held its own stirring sights behind an enclosure of wooden panels. An elderly American couple, straw hatted against the sun, were just leaving. An ashy starling skipped along the ground. And Marlene Rich, the top of her teal-colored bikini undone, one side of its skimpy bottom rucked into the cleft of her pert bottom, lay prone on a pad under a candelabrum tree.

She smiled to Nick's hello and watched as he took off his shirt and dove in. She watched as he went back and forth in the pool with the competent strokes of someone who had been coached.

Nick had swum for Yale, nothing like Olympic class, but he had, for his efforts, won a few ribbons, now packed away in another life. He went back and forth, as though trying to agitate himself to calmness. At least, as he pulled himself up onto the warmed tiles next to this apparition of what he was missing in life, he had an excuse for his racing pulse and evident breathlessness.

Because he could see, over the undone top of her bathing suit, the brown nipples of her small, beautifully conical breasts. He looked up at the faultless sky, looked down again. He had wanted to think about stick-walking and how we arrived at the human predicament.

"What are you reading?" he asked. Trite, he knew, but better than the weather.

She showed him the cover of a paperback. *Brazzaville Beach*. "It's set in Africa."

"Do you like it?"

"I don't know yet."

Marlene lay in oiled repose with her half-finished slow drink, at home poolside. He knelt not far from her propped book and toweled himself. He pretended a kind of thoughtfulness while glancing over her shapely feet, the exposed cheek, the nubs of her vertebrae, the part in her hair, the symmetry of it. The pain beauty provokes, someone had said.

Marlene put aside the book and pivoted herself up into a sitting position, making herself real. She might have been trying to rescue him from himself. Or keep him going. Because she was careless with her top,

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as though what it covered were only tits after all. So California. Then, arranging herself, she caught him looking, caught his glance and heard his involuntary intake of breath. He was kneeling, set back on his heels, silent, seemingly distracted. Except that the thin, clinging material of his trunks could not conceal a declaration more emphatic than words. Her eyes grew alert and then averted. He roused as from a spell and tried to adjust himself. It only made it worse. Finally he pulled the towel from around his neck and covered his lap, his lapse. It was that or dive back in the water.

“Sorry,” he said, his coloring having little to do with the silent sunlight washing down on them. It had been a while since he had responded like that to the real rather than to the remembered.

“Oh, that's all right.” If her eyes were sympathetic, her mouth was amused. Indeed, she was flattered by his unequivocal body language. She thought to herself, admiring the shape of his hair-slicked skull, that he had much to be shy about.

What could he say? She was another man's wife. She was a client. He played by the rules. Or hid behind them. To his surprise he found himself saying, “By the way, while we're on the subject.”

“Yes...”

“My tent is right next to yours.”

She cocked her head.

“The acoustics...”

She laughed. “I'm sorry...” But again she was more amused than embarrassed.

“I don't mind myself...”

“Really...?”

He laughed with her. “I'm a naturalist...”

“I see, like a licensed voyeur?”

“The same thing... But it's the others.” He met her eyes.

It was as though, without quite being acquainted, they had become intimate.

“Cigarette?” she offered.

“Thanks.”

“I think we're the only two.” She snapped him a flame on a disposable lighter and held it steady.

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Nick nearly relaxed with the inhalation of smoke and the sharing of an unfashionable vice. “You mean smoking? Yonah sometimes lights a pipe.”

“What’s with Yonah anyway?” She might have been mocking the name.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s so...”

“Dignified...?” He wanted to forestall any denigration of his friend.

“Uptight is more like it. He jumped all over me because Frank took a walk down to the lake... At the lodge.”

“He’s like that.” He made a gesture, trying to say, don’t let it bother you. “I tried to tell you. Africa isn’t a casual sort of place. For taking walks, I mean. And Yonah... Yonah’s very conscientious. He’s also very proud.”

“What’s he proud of?”

Her American directness disconcerted him. “I’m not sure his pride has an object. It’s how he lives.” He was able to arrange himself and put the towel aside.

“Does he have a family?”

Nick smiled at her curiosity. The Lion of Judah had gotten to her the way, eventually, he got to everyone. The way he had gotten to him. “He’s married to Edith. A Kikuyu woman. He has two grown children from a previous marriage. There’s Sam who’s married to a Canadian and lives in Montreal. Rachel is a lawyer with the UN. On a safari last year someone started telling lawyer jokes and Yonah got very offended.”

Her laugh echoed off the water and she turned on the towel, bringing herself closer. “And you, you have a family?”

“I have a mother and father in Burlington, Vermont, and three sisters scattered around. Three nieces and two nephews.”

“And they idolize you. The boys, that is.” Again, a faint, teasing mockery that might have been a tentative affection.

“I try not to disappoint them.”

“And a lady friend?”

“I did.”

“And?”

“She left me for a clergyman. A long story.”

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“Really? You must have been neglecting her.”

He hadn’t thought of it that way. “Actually I was.”

“For other ladies?”

She threaded the thin line between being nosy and showing interest. But her evident sympathy disarmed him. He said, “I was away a lot.”

“What were you doing?”

“Guiding. And digs. The digs are much longer. And then, I lived in Nairobi and she lived in Arusha.”

Marlene blew smoke without inhaling it. She took off her shades.

“What do you dig for?”

She was, he decided, more striking than pretty in any conventional way. Her nose and chin were distinct, as though eager. Her dark hair, drying in the blunt light, had a reddish luster. Her eyes, the irises edged with purple, waited for his.

“Fossils. Hominid remains. Early man, late apes, transitional forms. Not that we’re not a transitional form ourselves.” At least he felt like one.

There was keenness in her look. “That’s right, you were talking about it last night. You’re a…”

“Paleoanthropologist.”

“A paleoanthropologist.” She repeated the word, as though tasting it.

“And you’re a fashion consultant?”

“I am.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“What do I do?” Her voice changed timbre, turned darker with a touch of the dismissive. “I tell people with a lot of money and not much confidence what to wear for clothes.”

“Really?”

“And how to wear them.”

“They pay you for that?”

“You’d be surprised what people pay for.”

“I don’t mean to belittle it.” Or sound utterly naive.

“Oh, why not? Belittle away.” Her laugh, throaty, like her voice, revealed as much as her flimsy bikini. As though he had tapped some

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hidden gift for mirth. "It is frivolous in a way." She was animated now, her color up, her posture contracting, straightening. She named a few of her clients, actresses, names that even Nick Mercer, in his relative exile, recognized.

"That's impressive," he said, impressed himself by confirmation of an existence he took to be far larger than his own.

She blew smoke dismissively. "Not when you're up close." With a touch of pride he missed, she said, "And I have a small label of my own."

"Don't we all?" Which caught her short and made her laugh again, but ruefully.

"So you make clothes?" He realized his gaff and was trying to make it up.

"I design them."

"Amazing." He pictured cutting rooms, half-starved, temperamental models, celebrities, exquisitely bitchy gay men, life on another planet.

"Not really." She put out her cigarette after just a few pulls.

"What made you come on this safari?"

Marlene Rich shrugged as though confiding. "Something to do. Something to talk about, I guess. Frank wanted to do it. We were going to go on another one. A lot more walking than this one. Frank likes to get close to things."

"What happened?"

"It got canceled."

"That happens."

"So tell me about being a paleoanthropologist." She tongued the word again, voluptuously, with a whiff of payback mockery.

Nick suffered the tortured diffidence of a graduate student when it came to the grandeur of his subject. What could he tell her? People like Marlene Rich made him feel like he had stepped off the world, which went on elsewhere, a party he was missing. Was anything more tedious than the obscure passions of others, including his own? So that the vast and layered field of his obsession shrank under her expectant gaze to the dust and grumbles of a futile dig. N. Mercer tried and stumbled, started badly with a lot of jargon, hominid this and australopithecus that. Until

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again he could hear his Vermont twang, and found her patience unnerving.

“What exactly is a hominid?” she asked.

“Good question. Something I should have explained.” He was a TA again, chalk in hand before the blackboard. “Hominids are the bipedal primates, our ancestors and ourselves.”

“So you’re trying to find out how we got here?” Marlene sounded incredulous and encouraging. She sat with her arms around her legs, her glance sidelong.

“Right. That’s a good way of putting it. How we got here. A convincing creation story. Or one more convincing than Adam and Eve.” Which they might have been in their relative nakedness.

Her smile goaded him. He started again, slowly, warming to it, hitting his narrative stride. The words formed and flowed as his confidence swelled like an inner tumescence. He gave her a rapt description of the digs, of how, when you trowel down, the dusty earth teems with life, with traces of life. How, three million years ago there were baboons the size of gorillas, pigs as big as hippos, buffalo with horns seven feet across, giant cats. And an insignificant looking biped carrying a stick and living by its growing wits.

He should have left well enough alone. He had enthralled her, to judge by the tilt of her head and the stillness of her hands. But he could not resist his own enthusiasm. He could not resist taking an advance on what he saw as future glory. He announced his new theory.

“Stick-walking?” she said, ready to be impressed.

He hesitated and then rushed into it, leaving her behind in a welter of concepts and ellipses. Shrinking woodlands. Foraging strategies. Predators. Bipedal advantages. Walking stick. Stick walking. Spilling it out, he mentally scribbled new ideas as they occurred to him, the flood of thoughts like an elixir of self-intoxication.

Too late he saw she was having to crank up her own interest, or the appearance thereof, as her fine hands moved up and down her shins.

Marlene frowned because Nick had left her behind, talking to himself through her.

“What made you think of that?” A frown had banked her eyes, settled her features.

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The perfect question, despite the frown, in that it gave him a pretext to recount the eureka moment in the history of how his theory came to be. "I was just in my tent. After lunch. I was working on it. I saw Bernice walk by... using her cane."

"The doctor's wife?"

"Right. It was as though she personified what I already knew. Because the transitional stage between quadrupedalism and..."

"Our Bernice?"

"Right... Right..."

"Really?" The note of incredulity was giving way to one of hilarity. "And you thought...?"

"No, no, not that way..."

But she was already tittering.

She might have well have slapped his face. "What is it you find amusing?"

"Oh, I'm not laughing at you, Nick ..." She reached out and her hand rested on his arm. But her eyes and her wide mouth could not dissemble her merriment. "It's the thought of Bernice... I mean as..."

He did not join in the joke, which, despite Bernice, was on him. It was his theory, after all. He tried, but his smile was pained. His profundity had been mocked and wasted. For a moment he hated her, his hatred like a shock, like a kind of love.

"You're in over my head," she said, making up to him. She had found and touched his vulnerability, half conscious that, in doing so, she had rendered herself vulnerable as well.

He shrugged. "I doubt it."

They were silent a moment, recalculations of each to the other going on. Then she drew closer. "It must get lonely. On those digs, I mean." She gave him her sun-stunned presence, her eyes, and the perfume of her oiled skin. As though she might atone with seduction.

"It does. But, you know, it goes with the territory." He was shrugging verbally, shying away. She might find the longuets of his life as ludicrous as his theories.

At which point Frank arrived on the scene to the blast of uncertain trumpets - two hornbills squabbling in an overhanging tree. His flip flops smacked the concrete, his knee-length robe of silver gray silk opened

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from the cinched waist up, and a white towel hung over shoulder. With an amiable greeting he hunkered down next to them, apparently oblivious to their closeness. He had a stem of fine black hair rising from his flat stomach and spreading over his chest. His eyes, as he looked around, had a glint of the unappeased. He exuded a self-possession that wasn't quite certain, as though too self-possessed, he might miss something.

To Nick, with the faintest of smiles, he said, "Joyce was just looking for you. But don't go. I have a feeling it can wait." Joyce was already something of an in-joke. Then, "I don't suppose we could get a drink around here?"

"What do you want?" Nick, to regain his protective coloring as a factotum, made to rise.

Up on her knees, tucking herself in, Marlene stopped him. "I need the ladies." She put on a robe just like her husband's and left to get them drinks.

Frank had hunkered down on muscular calves and caught Nick's glance as Marlene got up to go. He half smiled, accustomed to other men being attracted to his wife.

"So when do we get to do some walk about?" Frank was fiddling with the elastic that held his ponytail in place.

"There are places. I could arrange it for you... afterwards."

"Could you guide us?"

"Not this go around. I'm committed to a dig."

"Really?" He shook out his hair, which made him look younger in a Medieval sort of way. "Around here?"

"Laetoli. Not that far."

"We were thinking of climbing Kilimanjaro."

"That'll be a walk about..."

Frank Combers laughed, as though paying for a joke. He stood up, took off his robe, and stepped to the edge of the pool. He was naked. He paused a moment, his buttocks as tanned as the rest of him, and dove in.

Nick watched the other man swim with easy strokes around the edge of the pool, like some trapped animal looking for a way out. Frank, finding no escape, rolled over on his back and floated, eyes closed, in the sun-dazzled water. An artist, sketching the slack-limbed figure in this

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bowl of light, might have emphasized the saturnine face suspended on the nimbus of hair and the branching darkness rooted in the prominent, circumcised knob.

Nick propped his head on a bunched towel, closed his eyes to stare blindly at the brightness beneath his lids, and started to drift. Marlene and Frank. He decided they possessed a species of glamour he had not encountered before. It was Hollywood without the glitz. It was old California. John Huston in *Chinatown*. Money too old to apologize for itself. Making distinctions, he drifted off.

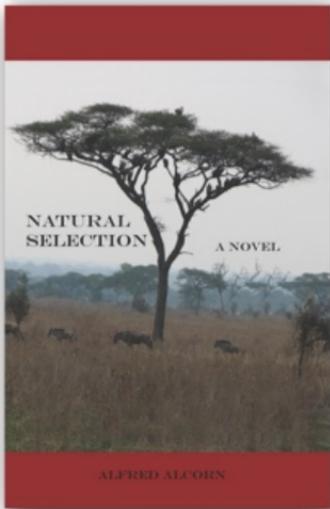
He awoke moments later with time out of whack for a second or two to find Marlene, modest in her robe, putting down the tray of drinks, something possessive in the fondness of her glance. Then Frank, surging out of the water, hoisting himself on muscular arms to sit on the pool edge, where he sat, a wet, dripping Pan. They took their drinks, the beer bottles beaded up, said, "cheers," and drank, the men thirstily, Marlene sipping.

At which point two families of Germans, part of Wilkers' group, came boisterously in. The kids were naked, the women plump, the men big and belly proud. "*Ein Nacktstrand, ya!*" one of the women laughed, seeing Frank in the buff, and pulled off her bikini. The other adults did the same, and the water a moment later was a roil of pink flesh and blond hair.

"See what you started," said Marlene.

Frank tipped himself into the pool, came up, and called, "Come on, you guys, get with the program."

Marlene shrugged and stepped out of her robe and bikini, unsexing herself, even for Nick, whose own nakedness seemed irrelevant as he followed her into the shimmering, reticulated water.



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