

The Celebration Husband

A Novel

DRAFT

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*This palpable-gross play hath well-beguiled
the heavy gait of night.*

— William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer
Night's Dream* V.i.384-85

Prologue

How the manuscript came to be in my possession is another novel, and not the one I've written. Life may flow seamlessly through stories so that they overlap, but a storyteller must start somewhere, and the beginning I've chosen is when the manuscript found me. I read it, and I knew I had to do something with it.

My conviction wasn't based merely on the strange and wondrous world conjured by the manuscript, a place with fantastic topography and extraordinary people. Really, I felt compelled to tell others of it. But more importantly the people in this strange and wondrous world made me love them. Their story, their antics, their anxieties, their adventures – everything about them commanded, entreated, cajoled and ultimately won my love.

Love, of course, makes me a bit crazy – like it does to everybody – and I committed myself to a course of action I never would have followed but for love.

That crazy undertaking was, as I said, to “do something” with the manuscript. But the problem was that the manuscript wasn't, shall we say, mass-audience ready. Technically, I suppose, it was in English. But it was an odd kind of English. People don't speak in that kind of English, and they certainly don't write in it. Only a person who was a bit mad (I refer, of course, to myself) would have waded through it in the first place, and I can't say I understood all of it.

So I took the liberty – and it was a big liberty – to rewrite the manuscript. Or, rather, not so much to rewrite it, as to write the story I think the manuscript meant to tell. Or maybe I just wrote the story I wanted to read. In any event, the “something” that I did

with the manuscript was to write this novel: a labour of love, and one suggesting dubious mental health credentials.

But love takes us places we wouldn't have otherwise gone (often for sound reasons), and my attitude is that – prevention being largely impossible – celebrating that insane journey makes more sense than bemoaning it.

— *Maya Alexandri, 20 September 2010*

1.

The fifth of August, 1914, was the day that Tanya Rungsted's husband, Baron Isak von Brantberg, avalanched into the drawing room with the heart-stopper that England and Germany were at war.

“Whatever for?” Tanya asked, once she regained her breath.

“You have me there,” Isak shrugged his craggy shoulders.

Isak's response made Tanya wonder if she'd overreacted to the news of the war.

“The colonies won't fight,” she hazarded.

“Kenya is fighting,” he corrected her. And without further discussion, he rumbled off to a meeting of the Swedish settlers, convened to decide whether they should volunteer their services to the leanly-staffed and ill-prepared British Army.

They did.

The Swedish settlers' farms, their families, their investments (both of finances and of passions) – all were embedded in British East Africa, which had welcomed European settlers of all nationalities under the auspices of the Empire. Now that its German neighbor to the south, Tanganyika, menaced Kenya, the Swedish settlers loosed their fighting instincts and rushed to her defense.

Isak joined an *ad hoc*, “irregular” military unit. His commander was Lord Delamere, the leading nobleman of the British colonists. The unit's mission was to defend the border. As the border was more than 750 kilometers long, and the unit had 24 men, Lord Delamere hoped to enlist the aid of native Masai warriors as scouts and guards.

About the eruption that, within 36 hours, took her newlywed husband from her and to a situation of deadly risk, Tanya knew nothing more.

* * *

A week after Isak departed, he sent Tanya a telegram:

MUST SEE YOU AND YOUR SUPERB PARTS, FACE, NECK, HANDS, WRISTS, ETC.
GO TO KIJABE RAILWAY STATION. TELEGRAPH BABU AN IDIOT, HIS JOB IS
YOURS. IT WILL BE FUN.

Reading the telegram, Tanya flushed with contradictory emotions. She was elated at Isak's ardor and simultaneously mortified at his references to the carnal. But however much she cringed, picturing the numerous eyes that must have been privy to this telegram, she was also proud to be identified (almost publicly) as a compelling beauty.

Her pride, however, was quickly offset by her despondent suspicion that Isak had sent the telegram from the Kijabe railway station. Whoever the poor Indian telegraph operator was – in (racist) colonial parlance, “Babu” – he was not going to be her champion. Never mind that she knew nothing about telegraph machines.

Nevertheless, the most important fact was that Isak wanted to see her. Eventually, that imperative emerged implacable through the emotional uproar, and Tanya bolted from her chair. She waved the telegram, rushed around the house, and – between many confusing and astonishing remarks – ordered Hassan to pack their effects.

“Memsahib?” Hassan blinked, uncharacteristically baffled.

“Yes Hassan?”

“You are joining the army?”

“Volunteering. Like Bwana Isak.”

“You are a Baroness,” he objected, hands folded over his chest.

“Bwana Isak is a Baron.”

“You are a lady.”

“Who owes obedience to her husband. Bwana Isak told me to go.”

“Sunstroke?”

“We all have a duty to the cause.”

“What cause?”

Tanya almost said, “You have me there,” but her impulse to educate and civilize overrode her urge for flippancy. “The cause of Western culture, Hassan, of Lord Byron, Beethoven, pre-Raphaelites —”

“— This Beethoven is German.”

Hassan had her there. Tanya groped for a response amid a crowd of self-reprimands: she herself had been the Prometheus who’d brought Beethoven to Hassan; she’d regularly played the Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Symphonies for him on her gramophone; she’d even cited Beethoven’s awe-inducing ability to compose while deaf as an inspirational anecdote. Now she had a sharp insight into her English neighbors who opposed education for the blacks.

“You speak German,” Hassan added ominously.

If their conversation had been a chess game, Hassan would have check-mated Tanya with this point. His remark, though an accurate statement of fact, invoked the menace of British gossips in Nairobi who fingered Tanya as a German spy.

Tanya tossed her head and straightened her shoulders in an effort to maintain her composure, but she had a lump in her throat. She resented being bested by Hassan, and she was furious at the British and their ignorance. Hadn't the English looked at a map? Didn't they know that Denmark and Germany were neighbors? Didn't they appreciate that speaking the language of a neighboring country is not suspicious? Didn't many British speak French? (Well, she conceded, probably not.) Besides which, were the British totally unaware of history? Had the two Schleswig-Holstein wars between Denmark and Germany in the 19th century made no impression on the British? (Well, she conceded, probably not.)

Among the Danish victims of German military aggression had been her father, who'd fought and been injured in the second Schleswig-Holstein war, and who eventually died of complications from his wounds when Tanya was 10. But Tanya doubted that even her father's sacrifice would be sufficient to exonerate her from British suspicion of treachery. "Hassan," Tanya finally managed, "why can women be shot as traitors, but not as soldiers?"

"You are not a traitor."

"Tell it to the bloody bitches in Nairobi. They'd see me hang! That may be all they can do to contribute to the cause, but we can do better. Pack up."

"You are," Hassan paused, "mad."

"Didn't you tell me that Allah loves the mad?"

"We must hope so, Memsahib."

* * *

Reporting for duty on 14 August, our heroine and her entourage were an odd group:

Commanding the procession was Tanya, small and shapely, mounted on her mare, Scarlet, a temperamental reddish-brown horse. Tanya wore her beige cotton safari suit and her knee-high, black leather boots with flat heels. Wisps of her light brown hair sprang from under her safari hat. She'd had the outfit tailored when she'd gone on safari with Isak in March, and it was among the few items in her wardrobe suitable for war service. For Isak's sake, she would have taken out of storage her silk stockings, feather boas, petticoats, and bejeweled heels, and carted them to Kijabe, but Hassan had thwarted this romantic whim.

Although Tanya had dressed for the job, and not for Isak, her motivations were entirely opposite. She was the British Empire's first telegraph station manager who served for love, not of King and country (England wasn't her country, after all), but of her husband. This love, she'd discovered, was an instrument of transformation. It had remade her from a daughter of the bourgeoisie into a Baroness; from a resident of Denmark into a colonist in Africa; from a girl who'd been to a Parisian art school into the Memsahib of a coffee plantation. That it should now recast her as a military telegraph operator was a development that Tanya, like Hassan, might have been inclined to question; but with Isak's word to bolster her confidence, she averted her gaze from her misgivings and saw herself transformed by Isak's desires.

Hassan, the second-in-command of Tanya's little war party, held Scarlet's bridle and stood taller than the horse's head. Even without his crimson turban (which added an

inch or two), Hassan exceeded six feet, and he appeared taller still because he was extraordinarily thin. Above his camel-hide sandals, he wore a gold-brocaded white cotton shirt and trousers (notably unsullied by the day's exertion in punishing sun). A Somali, Hassan prided himself on his handsome, refined features: the elegant eyebrows offsetting his magnetic eyes; his generous endowment of lashes; his broad jaw, sharp chin and straight teeth.

Unlike Tanya, Hassan was not a Romantic; he was a businessman, like his father. Growing up in Mogadishu, Hassan had assimilated as background noise his father's constant stream of complaints about the damage clan feuds were inflicting on his business. Always on the cusp of the trade that would make him wealthy, Hassan's father was perennially undermined by an inopportune murder, culminating in his own. Hassan was second to none in his appreciation of Somali tradition and the imperative of slaughtering one's rival clan members; but he wanted to make money. Events, moreover, had aligned to confirm Hassan's belief that his enrichment was the will of Allah: as majordomo in the von Brantberg household, Hassan had the security, stability and opportunity to make his fortune.

Rounding out Tanya's warriors was Kamau, the cook. Taller than Tanya, but considerably shorter than Hassan, Kamau was a Kikuyu tribesman, the single member of their party who'd been born in Kenya. Slender and young, Kamau had alert eyes and plump cheeks. He wore canvas trousers of a drab green and a yellowish muslin work shirt. Both his feet and his shaved head were bare. He was holding a rope to which was attached a disgruntled mule carrying a trunk, several boxes, Tanya's rifle and various cooking utensils.

Kamau served neither for love nor money, but for the spirit of adventurousness. He'd adopted a Kikuyu proverb as his motto: travelling opens ones eyes. Astonishing upheavals had occurred since the arrival of the British twenty years earlier, and Kamau was driven to journey through this remade world. Raised on the slopes of Mount Kenya to worship a god who lived at the mountain's peak, to be a warrior and to defend his village from the cattle-raiding Masai, Kamau had shaken off the confines of his communal upbringing shortly after he and all the boys in his age-grade had been circumcised. To protect him on his journey outside Kikuyuland, he'd purchased a powerful (and expensive) charm from a witch-doctor; by force of this charm, he'd become the cook in the von Brantberg kitchen. Although cooking was woman's work, Kamau recognized the magic's effect: he was an independent individual, the first in his family.

The final member of Tanya's eclectic band had no motivation beyond canine loyalty. Dionysus, Tanya's cherished Scotch deerhound, followed Tanya, although he allowed himself leeway to deviate from her path to chase other animals. A tall, rangy dog with a wiry, brown-and-white coat, Dionysus was now engaged in annoying the already ill-tempered mule. Though the party had stopped, Dionysus was agitating at the mule's heels, until a spasmodic kick that nearly collided with its target convinced Dionysus to have a seat and pant a bit.

Gokal (the "Babu" of Isak's telegram), having rushed out of the station at their arrival, halted and examined his new colleagues curiously. An imperial servant of some many years, Gokal was accustomed to a certain degree of order in the world. He understood that the British Army would, of necessity, deploy "irregular" units in this war:

August 5, 1914 had caught the military in British East Africa prepared for a native uprising, but totally unready for the challenge of a foreign war. The British Army lacked commanders, rank-and-file soldiers and logistical support – which is to say, everything. Without “irregulars,” the Protectorate would be overrun with Germans.

But this assembly of wayfarers seemed especially irregular. Gokal had seen old men and young boys, British and foreigners, nobility and their servants, as well as men in all manner of dress – and states of undress – composing (and disorganizing) the irregular units; but the salient point is that they’d all been men. He’d never seen a woman “irregular,” much less one as young looking as this doll. (That Tanya was twenty-seven would not have assuaged Gokal; he was forty-five.)

Nor did her entourage balance out the deficiency of her sex. Somalis were notoriously unreceptive to discipline. And Somalis in Kenya were typically the cowards and rejects of their clans, who’d fled Somalia in the (usually vain) hope of escaping the blood feuds and tyrannical rule of their elders. As for Kikuyus, they were ranked low among the tribes of Kenya for military prowess – the British usually tapped them to carry cargo.

Nonetheless, Gokal was an optimistic man who had seen everyone from Jews to untouchables contribute to the cause of the Empire, and he saw no reason to prevent these three from offering their contributions. Indeed, their manifest unsuitability for war evoked a sense of protective indulgence in Gokal. To deny them the opportunity to serve – however they could – would disrespect their dignity. (Of course, Gokal’s generous view was reliant on the fact that he’d been sick with dysentery the day Isak had sent the telegram summoning Tanya.)

Tanya (ignorant, naturally, of Gokal's convenient illness) met Gokal's gaze and then, uncertain, looked away and eyed her surroundings. The station was a squat wooden structure surrounded by corrugated iron shacks, sheds, piles of railway ties, wood and debris. Though bordered by thick underbrush that shaded into forest of pencil cedar and juniper, the land cleared for the station had been utterly stripped. It looked like a corpse, stiff and shriveled, disintegrating into red dust – though Tanya knew that, with rainfall and human neglect, the ground would resurrect the forest with fearful speed.

Looking beyond the station, Tanya absorbed the sumptuous Eastern Rift Valley: game-rich forest and fertile farmland punctuated by the voluptuous protrusion of the extinct volcano, Mount Longonot, to the west. Verdant green after the rains and dusty yellow during the dry season, Mount Longonot hid from Tanya's view Lake Naivasha, a vast stretch of fresh water so well integrated into the landscape that it often deceived observers into thinking it was part of the sky. Augmenting the Valley's grandeur were the clouds, transformed by moody and variable weather into actors in an epic drama, involving much darkening and glowing, rearing up, rolling about, thunder-and-lightning sound effects, and honey-cognac lighting.

Pitched midway on the escarpment that descends into the Valley, Kijabe afforded Tanya a prime vantage point for this spectacle. As her eye roamed the scene, grey and gold clouds floated at eye level, so that the capacious sky seemed to arch overhead and then drop below her into the Valley. Tanya had never before known the sensation of sky beneath her. Kijabe elevated her; Tanya felt that the scenery demanded that she present a better, more loving, more noble self.

Turning back to Gokal, Tanya asked shyly, “Who is in charge here?” She hoped to evade any awkwardness with Gokal by reporting directly to his superior.

Gokal furrowed his brow. He was a stationmaster, not a soldier. His boss was in Nairobi and, although Gokal had to defer to the military, no military was posted at the station. Captain Isak had meant to upend that situation. Incapacitated as Gokal had been during the Captain’s last visit, Gokal was definite about the instructions: military reinforcements were to take charge of the telegraph machine. However much this detachment could only qualify as “military” in a lunatic’s army, Gokal supposed that Captain Isak could make anyone a soldier if he chose. Besides which, Gokal had had enough experience with colonial memsahibs to know that questioning one’s authority was a mistake. “You are, Memsahib,” he answered.

* * *

“It will be fun.” Tanya studied the telegram intently, as if concentrated examination might coax a coded message to reveal itself. Less than two weeks into her Kijabe assignment, Tanya was already befuddled, disoriented and struggling for the Romantic gloss and noble approach to her experiences. Deprived of Isak’s company and seeking guidance, she turned to a paltry substitute: his words.

Repeatedly she scrutinized the telegram, now ragged from having been too many times handled by her sweaty hands, refolded and shoved into her dusty pockets. But the telegram continually failed to satisfy. What could Isak possibly have meant by, “It will be fun”?

Tanya couldn't make Kijabe fun. Hunger bedeviled her. Game was the most reliable food, and it was typically too lean to sate hunger pains for long. Deprivation became a constant, and Tanya's hunger pangs expanded their scope, demanding fresh fruit, seafood from Mombasa, soft bread and sweet cake, wine, bathing in her own bathtub with lavender oil, talcum powder, clean hair, her gramophone, her books, bed linens, a restorative night's sleep, romance, her husband, Isak's company, his jokes, his body.

Discomfort dominated her existence. The conditions at the station were better than in the field, but only marginally. The outhouse was too foul to use. Living quarters were primitive.

Tanya's accommodation was a canvas tent behind the wood pile. The tent was a simple contraption – a piece of canvas stretched over the crossbar of a metal “T” and tacked down at its four corners. The ground she covered with a blanket. Dust churned by trains invariably penetrated the interior. Shivering through the cold nights, Tanya was deprived of sleep by an oppressive number of bugs: spiders, beetles, mosquitoes, moths, ticks, flies and millipedes all demanded their share of her space.

Day and night the trains passed, and with each train came work. The offloading soldiers always needed assistance: return this cargo to Nairobi, post this letter to England, find these last-minute supplies for the field. And telegraph this message.

Tanya didn't know how to operate the telegraph machine, but Gokal had persuaded her to supervise his use of it, rather than to learn Morse code herself. Supervise she did: she sorted the habitual crush of soldiers clamoring to send messages,

corrected Gokal's English on outgoing telegrams, rustled up replacement parts when the machine broke and kept Gokal company.

She also handled the runners from the field; these native men bore information for conveyance to Nairobi and carried back to their camps whatever intelligence had accumulated at the station. The runners from Lord Delamere's unit assured Tanya that Isak would make the trek himself. But Isak had not yet appeared.

His absence provoked a riot of unpleasant emotions for Tanya. When she'd first begun relying on Isak's telegram for solace, she'd focused on its first sentence: "Must see you." But the contradiction between Isak's urgency in the telegram and the time he was taking to materialize in Kijabe caused Tanya terrible stress. Why didn't he come? Was he being worked day-and-night by Lord Delamere? Was Isak injured? Wouldn't the native runners have told her if Isak had been hurt (or worse)? Or had they been ordered to lie to "protect" her? To avoid these painful and (for the moment) unanswerable questions, Tanya had shifted her attention to the last sentence of the telegram: "It will be fun."

And although Tanya spent many hours attempting to discern what Isak had intended her to do in order to make that sentence true, she knew that Isak – automatically, as naturally as he breathed – could have made Kijabe fun. A mountain among men, he was a man around whom celebration coalesced, like clouds clinging to a peak. Isak was impossible not to love. Tanya's great impetus to marry him was her intuition – correct if the first nine months were any indication – that he could transform even a dour bourgeoisie institution like marriage into good time. Kijabe wouldn't even be a challenge for him. Dirt? He would lick it off her. Exhaustion? He didn't know what it was, and

his ignorance was infectious. Wine? The man was so ingenious at maintaining a steady supply of the lubricant that Bacchus himself could have studied Isak's methods.

Tanya refolded Isak's telegram before stashing it in a hidden pocket inside her shirt. Ah, Isak, but that you were here, thought Tanya, closing her eyes.

"Memsabu," came a breathless voice.

Tanya opened her eyes to face Kinuthia, a barefoot, compact Kikuyu man, who was struggling to regain his breath. He was a runner with Lord Delamere's unit, and Tanya was startled to see that he was wearing Isak's hand-me-downs: blue canvas trousers and a cotton shirt, both too large and much soiled.

Tanya hadn't seen Kinuthia's approach. Rolling cloud cover on the escarpment had blocked her view of Eastern Rift Valley; besides which Kinuthia's path was hidden in the foliage. Preferring her excitement (at a messenger from Lord Delamere's unit) to her disappointment (that Isak had once again sent a runner in his place), she greeted Kinuthia enthusiastically: "What's the news? Is it from Isak?"

Kinuthia nodded.

"Gokal!" Tanya called inside the railway station, where the telegraph machine was housed in a backroom. "What did Isak say?" Tanya turned back to Kinuthia expectantly.

"No telegraph, Memsabu," said Kinuthia, recovering his voice and straightening up.

"No?"

Kinuthia shook his head. "No, nothing for Nairobi. For you."

“For me?” Tanya asked and immediately blushed, thinking how indiscreetly Isak had summoned her to Kijabe. Now she braced herself for another embarrassing breach of privacy. How could Isak send a love message via native runner?

“Gather supplies and get a man to take them to Narosera River,” Kinuthia recited from memory.

“Supplies? What kind of supplies?” Tanya asked, surprised – as well as relieved, and then disappointed – at the impersonal nature of the message.

Kinuthia retrieved a list from his trousers pocket and handed it to her. It was soggy with sweat.

Accepting the list gingerly, Tanya read, “Petrol, tins of bully beef, biscuits, sugar, wheat flour, corn flour, paraffin —” She broke off with a frown. “They want wagons and wagons of supplies. Who’s going to take the supply train to them?”

“Isak said get a man,” Kinuthia repeated.

“What man? They’re all enlisted,” Tanya worried. “The only men who aren’t fighting the war are German sympathizers and prisoners.” Tanya looked searchingly at Kinuthia.

He wanted to respond, “I’m a man.” Instead, he adopted a blank facial expression. Kinuthia knew that, when Isak said “man,” he didn’t mean “man,” but “white man.”

Tanya seemed like she might be more progressive in these matters than her husband, but Kinuthia dismissed the possibility than anyone in the East African theatre of war – even a misfit like Tanya – would put a black man in charge of a supply train. The colonials didn’t trust the natives. Even as a military enlistee, Kinuthia was forbidden to

carry a gun – despite his long run across disputed territory – because the British feared a native uprising as much (probably more) than they feared the Germans.

Kinuthia's mask was possibly less vacant than he'd intended because Tanya's next remark was, "I wish I could send the supplies with you, Kinuthia, but I could never forgive myself if you were caught."

Kinuthia was taken aback and a little confused by her statement. Perhaps she didn't know, he thought, that he was wearing a magic totem to combat this evil. "To the Germans, I am invisible," he offered.

"Not the Germans, the British. You know the regulations. No one would believe that you weren't stealing."

Kinuthia looked away. Colonial mandate reserved rations of sugar and other supplies for white people; natives were forbidden to possess them. Kinuthia nodded. "They would think that, Memsabu."

Tanya sighed and then resolved herself, "I'll have to find someone. Where do the supplies need to go?"

"Narosera River," Kinuthia reiterated.

"Where's that?"

"Masailand." Kinuthia uttered the word with a combination of disgust and gloating: disgust because the Masai were historic enemies of the Kikuyu; gloating because "Masailand" now referred to the reserve onto which the British had confined them.

No less than for Kinuthia, the word "Masailand" conjured a complex response from Tanya. She'd heard much about Masailand from other settlers and, if what those

settlers told her wasn't as nuanced and objective as might be necessary to term their intelligence "accurate," it was in any event the only intelligence Tanya had on the topic. And based on those settlers' reports, she was sure she could more readily find a volunteer to lead a supply train to hell. It would be cleaner. The Masai lived in huts plastered with dung that were – unsurprisingly – always covered in flies. Their primary food was sour milk mixed with ox blood and urine, a culinary concoction that Tanya could not fathom being consumed by any creature with a sense of taste. Somehow the Masai had developed the notion that goat fat was good for the skin, and they slathered it all over themselves, with the consequence that they stank like rancid incense.

Amazingly, these hygiene practices did nothing to curb the tribe's decidedly non-Christian (and disturbingly frequent) sexual practices, which themselves were incomprehensible in light of the Masai circumcision customs. The Masai circumcised both sexes and left, in the female's case, almost nothing with which to work.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this deprivation of certain aspects of female company, the Masai warriors had – until the advent of colonialism – slaughtered all intruders into their immense territory, which included substantial stretches on both sides of the border that Britain and Germany had drawn. They had also demonstrated redoubtable skill at slaughtering the tribes in any territory beyond the areas they claimed. Their resulting reputation for fighting prowess endowed the typical Masai male with a stunningly arrogant attitude.

It had also inspired effusive admiration from certain of the male settlers. Lord Delamere, for instance, lavished unstinting affection on the Masai. It was Lord Delamere's opinion – much urged upon Tanya – that the Masai were now safely caged on

their reservation, and that the necessity of foreswearing their warring ways had been impressed up on them . . . but Tanya didn't believe him.

Even if she could assemble the supplies, and find a man foolhardy enough to lead the ox wagons, Tanya doubted it would ever reach Lord Delamere. If the Masai simply stole the goods and didn't butcher the supply train staff, she'd consider it a victory for the British cause.

"Where in Masailand?" Tanya asked weakly.

"Far south. Near the border."

Tanya raised her eyebrows hopefully at the possibility that the supply train would be ambushed by the Germans and plundered honorably, instead of being barbarically destroyed by the Masai. "No map?"

"No map, Memsabu," Kinuthia confirmed. "I shall draw one?" he suggested helpfully.

"Never mind," Tanya shook her head, familiar (as she was) with Kinuthia's maps and the sorrow that inevitably followed any attempt to use one. A yearning for Isak gripped Tanya like a cramp. Isak: now there was a man who could draw a map.

* * *

"Hassan!" Tanya raced up to him, flushed. "Organize a supply train – this is the list of the supplies – do we have wagons?"

"Yes, Memsahib."

"How many?"

“Four.”

“That should suffice. We’ll need porters – take workers from the coffee plantation. We’ll need about twenty, I expect, for four wagons. And find oxen.” Tanya frowned thoughtfully; four wagons would need at least forty oxen – eighty would be better, though, if they were available – and the coffee plantation was already short of livestock. “Get as many oxen from neighboring farms as you can, tell them it’s for the cause.”

“What cause, Memsahib?”

“Not again, Hassan, please. We’re upholding civilization against . . . well —”

“Against German civilization, Memsahib?”

“They’re very brutal to their natives, Hassan. Anyway, the settlers won’t ask, just tell them it’s for the cause, and they’ll understand. Oh, and we need a man.”

“A man, Memsahib?”

“Yes, a man, Hassan. Someone who can lead the supply train through Masailand to Lord Delamere’s camp on the Narosera River. Ask the natives if any *mzungu* men are left on the farms. If there are, they’re cowards or German sympathizers, but ask anyway. I don’t know of anyone, but you know how the natives always know everything.”

Her generalizations about the “natives” did not discomfit Hassan because he did not consider himself a “native,” a perspective with which Tanya agreed: Hassan, like herself and Isak, was an expatriate taking advantage of economic opportunity offered by the Empire.

Hassan also didn’t consider himself black, although here he and Tanya parted ways. Hassan, like most Somalis, identified himself as a descendant of the Prophet’s

relative, Abu Talib, whose seafaring progeny had marooned themselves on Africa's Eastern Coast some time after the Prophet's death. The visibly apparent admixture of Bantu genes that had occurred in the intervening twelve or so hundred years did nothing to persuade Hassan of his relation with the natives of British East Africa. His obviously black appearance, on the other hand, did nothing to convince the British that his entitlements should be equivalent to theirs.

“Who is that, Hassan?”

Tanya, now that she had conveyed her orders, relaxed enough to notice that she had interrupted Hassan in the middle of a business transaction. She'd seen money change hands – not a lot – but she hadn't seen any goods, and now the man was walking away along the denuded land around the railway tracks. Like Hassan, the man wore a turban.

“My brother,” explained Hassan.

“Which brother? That's not Aden. Has more of your family come to Nairobi since the war started?”

“My brother-cousin,” elaborated Hassan.

“Brother-cousin? What's that?” Then, remembering that Hassan himself had three wives in Mogadishu, Tanya hazarded, “One of your father's sons by another of his wives?”

“Not in this case, Memsahib.”

A motor started behind Tanya. The sound was significant because the Kijabe railway station had only one motor lorry, and it belonged to the British Army. Tanya turned to watch Hassan's brother-cousin driving away in the British Army's lorry. Gawking helplessly at the lorry rumbling down the rudimentary road descending the

escarpment, she reflected that, in addition to forbidding blacks from carrying guns, the colonial administration might do well to prevent them from driving.

Whipping around to face Hassan, Tanya narrowed her eyes, flared her nostrils and thrust out her lower lip. “Hassan, you have just sold a lorry that isn’t yours.”

“Not sold, Memsahib. Rented.”

“Renting is just as bad!”

“Not bad, Memsahib. Destined. We Somalis say: a dog that doesn’t eat meat laid before it is not alive.”

Tanya dismissed Hassan’s proverbial argument with a wave of her hand and an exasperated cry: “That brother-cousin of yours is never going to return that lorry!”

“No, no, Memsahib. Bwana von Otter is building a greenhouse, and my brother-cousin takes charge of the construction. These preparations,” Hassan added purposefully, “are for growing food for the British cause. My brother-cousin will return with the lorry tomorrow.”

Tanya considered Hassan’s story. Lief von Otter, like Isak, had volunteered for the war effort. His farm was at the base of the escarpment, just below Kijabe; and, like herself, Lief von Otter had a Somali manservant. (Indeed, many settlers with aristocratic pretensions had Somali manservants, a trend fueled by the Somalis’ own view that they themselves were noble and superior to the Bantu “slave races.”)

But even if Hassan’s “brother-cousin” would return the lorry tomorrow, Hassan was still profiteering off British government property. Tanya felt sure that she would be held responsible for Hassan’s wrongdoing, were it discovered. She imagined the gossip in Nairobi: “She was *pretending* to help the cause, but in reality she was *stealing* from the

Army,” with the knowing supplement, “She diverted the money through her *servant*.”

Seizing her brow with both hands, Tanya inhaled sharply and rasped, “Hassan, go back to the coffee plantation.”

“Memsahib?”

“The coffee plantation. Get on the next train. Go home. You can’t stay here.”

“But the supplies?”

“I’ll do it myself. Somehow. Go. Really.” And then catching sight of the conflicted expression on his face – should he be insulted? Or should he summon a doctor to treat Memsahib’s nervous exhaustion? – she snapped, “Oh stop it. I’d like nothing better than to get on the next train myself. I need a bath! I’m jealous of you getting to take one.”

Tanya turned sharply and crossed the railway tracks with emotional strides. She was about to enter the stationhouse when Gokal hurried out of the corrugated iron shed that served as his quarters and stopped her with a question: “Memsahib, you are thinking of telegraphing?”

Tanya turned to Gokal with snort of frustration. Gokal, she knew, was well intentioned, but she was tired of his constant questions. What she was thinking of doing was none of his business.

Sizing up the kindly Goan, however, Tanya relented. Gokal was very thin, but he had a wobbly tummy that protruded from his abdomen and reminded Tanya of a soft-boiled egg. Although he was clean-shaven, unlike many of the Indians she had seen in British East Africa, his hair was in need of trimming. With his stiff mane sticking out in all directions and his expression of wild neediness to please, Gokal struck Tanya as a toy

imbecile, a kind of village idiot for children. (She never would have conceived that he was an amazing catch in India – that women’s families had feuded over him – and that his well-fed wife and educated children enjoyed considerable status among their peers because of Gokal’s earnings and cosmopolitan residency on another continent.)

“I am thinking,” Tanya said, articulating her words for emphasis, “of going back to my coffee plantation and taking a bath.”

“Now is a good time for such thinking because the telegraph is not working,” Gokal said approvingly.

Tanya glared at Gokal, but he didn’t seem to be mocking her. Her sigh betrayed fatigued resignation. “Why isn’t the telegraph working Gokal?”

“It is the usual giraffe gallivanting, Memsahib.”

In constructing a telegraph line to traverse British East Africa, from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Kisumu on Lake Victoria, the British had failed to consider the low esteem with which the African fauna would hold their handiwork. If the telegraph poles weren’t being eaten by termites or knocked down by rhinoceroses, the lines themselves were constantly being snapped by baboon acrobatics or giraffe migrations.

“Why couldn’t the British have strung the wires higher than the giraffes?” Tanya groused. “Gokal, why didn’t the British measure the giraffes and build the telegraph poles higher than them?”

Gokal gave the question the grave consideration of one who, in the Imperial scheme, would have been tasked with measuring the giraffe. “Memsahib,” he answered finally, “by what method are you proposing to measure the giraffe? I am not feeling

confident that a giraffe is easily measured even in death, on account of the stiffness and the decay stench and the hyena and the jackals and the vultures, and in life, a giraffe —”

“Gokal, send a *fundee* to fix the telegraph line!” Tanya burst out.

“Memsahib, it is impossible.”

“Why?”

“With what am I fixing the telegraph line? Copper wire we have not.”

Recalling the duty incumbent on Baronesses to maintain an aristocratic mien, Tanya composed her face in what she hoped was an expression of noble suffering, rather than mere hysteria. She straightened her spine, adjusted her shoulders and, in a sharply confined movement, tossed her head. “Gokal, I will find the copper wire.”

* * *

“Hassan, get some copper wire,” Tanya instructed. She’d found him in the Kijabe station storehouse, sorting tins of bully beef. After he didn’t respond promptly, she added unnecessarily, “The telegraph line is down again.”

As Tanya had a habit of banishing him, only to seek his assistance within the half hour, Hassan had learned that the best way to serve Memsahib was to disobey her exile orders. Of course, her banishments typically involved restriction to another part of the coffee plantation; never before had she commanded him to ride a train. But that extreme injunction seemed strictly a side-effect of their situation in wartime; and, as they both knew, that same situation made his presence all the more necessary.

Beyond being indispensable, however, Hassan was irreplaceable: as their service at the Kijabe railway station made too clear, human resources in wartime were even scarcer than baths. Nonetheless, Hassan's security in his position did little to reduce his inclination to show dudgeon.

"Where should I get copper wire, Memsahib?" he protested dully, still concentrating on his tins of bully beef.

"I know you can get copper wire, Hassan. You have to get it. For the cause."

"What cause, Memsahib?"

"Not again, Hassan! You know that the British stopped the tribal fighting. They brought peace. And to maintain that peace, we need copper wire, so you have to get it."

"Peace, Memsahib?" Hassan sat back on his heels and looked innocently at Tanya. "What peace are we enjoying with this European tribal war?"

"This is a great war, Hassan, not a tribal war!" Tanya bristled. "We're not fighting over goats and camels!"

"This fact is curious, Memsahib," Hassan conceded, evincing genuine interest. "A Somali wars for camels; a Masai for bulls; a Kikuyu for goats. What do the English war for?"

"Principles."

"What principles?"

"Peace. Ending tribal warfare." Then, realizing the ridiculousness of fighting a war over the principle of peace, Tanya blustered, "England and Germany aren't tribes! They're nations. Like Denmark."

"Like Somaliland."

“No, Somalis are a tribe.”

“What’s the difference between a tribe and a nation?”

As sincerely as Tanya wanted to extricate herself from Hassan’s end-run around her orders, she found herself trapped. Hassan expertly played on her conviction that educating her lessers was a noble duty. “Nations have governments . . . and culture . . . and land boundaries —”

“And armies.”

“And armies.”

“Armies that cross oceans and conquer foreign lands,” Hassan suggested.

“That need supplies,” Tanya corrected him. “And communications. Which is why we need copper wire. Hassan, please. Getting copper wire is another opportunity for you to profiteer, so please just do it and get rich and go back to Mogadishu to your wives and your camels. All I want is a bath, and I’m stuck here like a prisoner.”

“Memsahib, you must not stay here,” Hassan agreed.

“Hassan, do you think I can return to the coffee plantation, bathe, and get back here by evening? If I catch the next train —”

“Memsahib, you must go to Malena Holmberg’s farm.”

“Why? Even if I take a bath there, I won’t have a change of clothes, and this outfit is too dirty —”

“Because the man is at Malena Holmberg’s farm.”

“The man, Hassan?”

“The man, Memsahib.”

“The man for the supply train,” Tanya muttered, and her face crumpled. The morning’s events had frayed her completely; and it was only mid-day. Biting her lip, Tanya internally cataloged: another day without Isak, another day without hygiene, another day without any recognizable pleasure – another day in which the war took precedence to everything beautiful and worthwhile in life. She felt herself teetering between a bath, on one side, and going berserk, on the other. The satisfactions and pleasures of cleanliness and the scent of soap – and maybe some powder and perfume – were all the restorative she needed. But she needed it. Or she could get on a horse and ride for an hour and half each way in an insane attempt to commandeer some farm overseer – who was no doubt a coward or a German sympathizer – for the war effort. For the cause. For her love of Isak. Tanya had to make her choice.

“He is the only man in Kijabe,” Hassan added, not entirely suppressing an amused smile.

Gamely brushing the hair off her forehead and coaxing her face into an expression that she hoped passed for *noblesse oblige*, Tanya proclaimed, “Hassan, I am going to get the only man in Kijabe.”

2.

Malena Holmberg's farm sprawled along the floor of the Eastern Rift Valley for six thousand acres that stretched from the edge of Lake Naivasha out towards the escarpment. It occupied geography formed by a tectonic tear, a cleaving of rock that produced the dramatic scene of cliffs presiding over an undulating landscape of volcanic craters and flamingo-studded lakes. Left unmolested, the terrain boasted a magnificence of plant and animal life appropriate to an area that would come to be hailed as the actual Garden of Eden. (When, almost fifty years later, Tanya heard about the fossilized remains of ancestral humans that Louis and Mary Leakey were excavating from Olduvai Gorge, Tanya understood immediately that the resplendence of the Rift Valley had been the catalyst for those transitional monkeys to develop the brain capacity for aesthetic appreciation.)

Candelabra euphorbia – a satyr-like plant: half-cactus, half-tree – along with the ubiquitous flat-top acacia, provided Tanya with dominant images for her memory, along with the wild coffee bushes blossoming in the shade of the cedar and juniper forests. The shrubby whistling thorn tree and its bulbous, black, ant-filled galls was an abiding warning of the deprivation and hostility that could characterize the landscape if insufficient rain withered the softening cover of gangly leleshewa, skinny-stemmed wild marigold, and purple-flowered Sodom apple.

The antelope in their many varieties – impala, Thomson's gazelle, dik dik, water buck – seduced Tanya with their combination of coquettish prancing and powerful leaping. She had less fondness for baboons and warthogs, both of which seemed almost cute as babies, but which degenerated into massive, ugly beasts as they aged. Tanya was

also disappointed that the appealing smile of the hippopotamus was paired with a rude – potentially fatal – temperament. And leopards terrified her because they ate dogs.

Dionysus, who ran beside Tanya as she cantered through the Valley, was not allowed outside after dark because Tanya wished to avoid grieving her companion's fate as a leopard's dinner. Had he possessed the communications skills to convey his opinions about Tanya's curfew policy, Dionysus would have expressed relish at the opportunity to chase and fight leopard and would have shrugged off the risk of death as one honorable for a creature of his station. Precisely because Tanya intuited Dionysus' stupidity without being told, she kept him indoors at night.

Lions, in contrast to leopards, struck Tanya as lordly and (importantly) manageable because, on safari with Isak back in March, she had killed two. That safari – memories of which always surfaced when she immersed herself in the Valley's scenery – had been the most complete celebration of life that Tanya had experienced to date. Stalking game in the lush grassland, Tanya had near swooned from the vibrant engagement of all her senses. She'd struggled – happily, excitedly – fully to absorb the melodies of troubadour birds in the surrounding bush, the feel of moths purring beside her ears at dusk, the dwarfing sight of the expansive geography, the smell of warm dung when they were close on the trail of their prey, the taste of Isak's salty sweat on her lips after he kissed away her fear of the deadly animal she would eventually shoot.

The safari had shown Isak at his most glamorous. His unerring sense of direction, along with his ability to map the ground they covered in his head, prevented them from losing their way in the bush; and his impressive speed and accuracy with his rifle protected them from any animal dangers. Even his colossal form seemed proportionate in

the immensity of a landscape that accommodated volcanoes, elephants and lakes that might be mistaken for seas; beside Isak in the wild, Tanya felt herself the “freeborn soul, which” – in Byron’s account – “loves the mountain’s craggy side.” Accepting Isak’s attentive lessons on proper rifle usage, listening to his ribald and intimate stories over the campfire, allowing him to sponge her off with the hot water that legions of porters had carried in buckets for her pleasure, Tanya thrived on the strengthening, health-giving effects of the undivided, loving attention of her husband.

When Tanya reached the Holmberg’s property, civilization – or at least, an outpost of it – intruded on Tanya’s recollected idyll. The approach to the Holmbergs’ modest farmhouse betrayed some of the extent to which Malena and her husband, Erik, had not left the Eastern Rift Valley to its own devices. The diverse and chaotic conglomeration of plants had been cleared, and the floor of the Rift Valley itself appeared to have been trammed into polite presentation.

Visible in the distance were rows of potatoes and maize – this year’s crop. Last year, Erik and Malena had planted wheat and lost everything. Unlike the wheat, the potatoes and maize were at least surviving, but their market value was too paltry to save the farm from a second year of debt. Erik and Malena had been considering experimenting with grapes or apples the following year, but the war had halted all their planning for the future.

Tanya rode past a small pond, the byproduct of a dammed stream, which had been stocked with trout, courtesy of the colonial administration’s permissive attitude towards invasive foreign species. What few of the Holmbergs’ Hereford cattle remained, after the most recent rinderpest outbreak, milled (along with the occasional zebra) in an adjacent

pasture. Goats and sheep grazed on the short grasses around the house, while scrappy chickens and lean turkeys pecked at crickets and stray specks of grain. A kitchen garden on one side boasted tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, aubergines, cabbages, sweet peas and fennel. Potted geraniums lined the steps up to the veranda around the simple stone and wood house.

Malena and Erik were among the small group of Scandinavian settlers who, like Tanya and Isak, had taken advantage of the British Empire's hospitality. And because British hospitality can be variable, Tanya was grateful for Malena's hospitality. The population of British East Africa boasted some five thousand or so colonial administrators and settlers, and some untold million plus people from other groups – social and economic refugees like Boers, Indians and Somalis, as well as the innumerable tribes of natives like the Kikuyu, Masai, Swahili, Kavirondo and Ndorobo. In this polyglot and pluralism, the other Scandinavian settlers offered Tanya the pleasures of home.

Since her sojourn in Kijabe had begun, Tanya had frequented the Holmbergs' farm, and she'd managed to establish friendly relations with Ibrahim, the Holmbergs' Somali manservant, to whom she now handed Scarlet's reins. Tanya's cordial relationship with Ibrahim was an accomplishment, given the unhappy coincidence of Ibrahim's and Hassan's clans being enemies committed to the obliteration of each other's members. Tanya at first tried to broker an "immigrant's peace" that would leave blood feuds in the homeland. When it became apparent that the most likely outcome of Tanya's efforts would be the knifing death of one or the other of Hassan or Ibrahim, Tanya elided the problem by leaving Hassan at Kijabe.

A more devout Muslim than Hassan, Ibrahim shunned dogs, and he paired his greeting of Tanya with a vigorous hiss that sent Dionysus scampering after a long-legged, orange-faced secretary bird that was hunting snakes in the kitchen garden.

Notwithstanding his rebuff of Dionysus, Ibrahim greeted Tanya with the respect and admiration due to the sister of the Memsahib of the house – or sister-cousin, as Ibrahim thought of Tanya, since she and Malena were of the same Scandinavian tribe.

For tribe mates, Tanya and Malena couldn't have contrasted more sharply in their physical appearances. Where Tanya was short, Malena had height; Tanya's hair was an undistinguished color offset with a limp wave, while Malena's was a fine-stranded blonde; and Tanya's brown eyes rested on Malena's light complexion: blue eyes, near non-existent eyebrows and pale thin lips.

Despite the physical differences in coloring and build, the friends were able to share clothes, thanks to Tanya's impatience with her weight. The moment a waistline buttoned with less than total compliance, the instant a bust was filled a smidgeon too completely, the offending garment was bequeathed to Malena. For her part, Malena was happy for novel attire and, since she rarely left the farm, she didn't mind shirt sleeves and trouser legs ending above her wrists and ankles respectively. When Tanya's weight dipped again, and she regretted her hastiness (shopping not being an activity that Nairobi supported with any vim), she sheepishly requested the return of her clothes. At first taken aback, Malena nonetheless complied and eventually came to view Tanya's wardrobe as a kind of rotating supplement to her own.

Now, as Malena greeted Tanya in an embrace, Tanya pouted, "I could use those twill slacks. The ones I'm wearing are filthy."

“You shall have them then,” Malena smiled. Holding her friend at arm’s length and appraising Tanya like she was a wayward sheep home from a night dodging hyenas, Malena concluded, “The good Lord is keeping you fine.”

“Under His ministrations, I’ve lost enough weight. Anytime I complain about the war, please remind me that it’s starving me thin.”

“Surely not, dearest,” Malena clucked, concerned. She guided Tanya from the wooden veranda into the white washed, sparsely-furnished sitting room.

“I’m not thin?”

“Yes, of course,” Malena murmured soothingly. “But not starving, I pray.”

“Game, game, game . . . and I have to shoot it —”

While Tanya talked, Malena signaled to her servant, Mugo, to bring tea. From a sideboard, Malena took a brightly patterned Swahili kanga – a textile she’d purchased when she’d arrived at the Port of Mombasa – and spread it on the handmade wooden table.

“—I ran out of bullets around Eid and wasn’t resupplied until yesterday, so Hassan had to break his Ramadan fast with wimbi porridge. Thank heavens his imam gave him dispensation to eat game. It’s not *halal*, you know.”

Malena didn’t know. Indeed, the significance of breaking a Ramadan fast with wimbi porridge eluded Malena – who had no awareness of the goat with which Ibrahim and his family had broken their fast – but the idea of starving for lack of bullets impressed her. “I’ve been remiss,” she apologized. “I’ll send vegetables to Kijabe for you. I’d send dairy, but we’re giving what little we have to the soldiers. Between the rinderpest, foot-and-mouth disease, and East Coast fever,” Malena passed a hand across

her brow as if to wipe away memories, “I can only pray that the vultures will help the cause since they’ve been eating all the carcasses of our poor cattle that were supposed to feed the troops.”

Tanya had drifted to a bookshelf on the opposite wall and was examining Erik’s books, the only nonfunctional items in the room. *Diary of a Seducer, A Midsummer’s Night Dream, Don Juan, Our Mutual Friend, Anna Karenina*. Tanya winced. She’d long ago memorized the titles of Erik’s few books; she didn’t know why she insisted on rattling the past with the titles on their spines. Desperate as she was for reading material at Kijabe, she couldn’t read these books. Again. She’d had the misfortune to have read them all during her sojourn at art school in Paris, and Erik’s books were consequently evocative of circumstances she needed to forget.

Mugo thankfully steered her away from any further thoughts of Paris by entering with the tea tray.

“Bread!” Tanya swooped, snatching a slice of toast off the tray.

“My most sincere apologies,” Malena said, as Mugo placed the tray on the table.

“We haven’t had fresh bread since the war started, so it’s,” Malena counted, “three weeks old.”

“Mold!” Tanya grimaced. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“Here dearest,” Malena handed her a cloth napkin. “I am so sorry. Try another slice.”

“Ugh,” Tanya grumbled, balling up the napkin in which she’d deposited her mouthful. “Tea?”

“Again, my apologies,” Malena frowned, pouring the tea. “It’s a bit light. I’m afraid that, with tea in short supply —”

Tanya gulped the cup down before Malena could finish. “Bliss,” she pronounced.

“— We sent our stores of tea, and sugar and flour and everything else to the troops —”

“— Now it’s my turn to apologize, Malena.” At the tone of Tanya’s voice, Malena glanced up anxiously. Tanya plunged on, “That’s why I’ve come, too.”

“Kijabe needs tea?”

“No, Kijabe needs a man.” Tanya jumped up and walked over to the curtainless window. She peered out at the assortment of thatched-roof mud huts belonging to the squatters – natives whose land the farm had been before Malena and Erik had bought it from the British government; natives who now tended the potato and maize fields in exchange for the right to continue living on (what they considered to be) their own property. Despite the latent potential for hostility about territory claims – a potential that was to lose its latent character in the coming decades – in 1914 Malena and Erik, like most colonial settlers, welcomed the squatters as a guaranteed source of farm workers in an otherwise tight labour market.

In the shoe-less, shrieking children of the squatter families, Dionysus had found friends. He was earnestly engaged in a vigorous game of chasing the children, while the children jubilantly pulled at the gentle dog’s ears and fur. A crooked but formidable grandma interrupted the festivities to order the children back to work, tending goats. Tongue lolling and panting, Dionysus watched the children disperse, after which he reluctantly resigned himself to lying in the sun and scratching numerous itches.

Tanya was hoping to catch sight of the last man in Kijabe; but, if he was on the Holmberg farm, he was not within sight of the sitting room window. Turning back to Malena, Tanya explained the ox wagon predicament. “The natives betrayed your secret: you’ve managed to keep an able-bodied man unenlisted up until now, but – alas, I’m sorry – no longer.”

“Ah, Mr. Baden,” Malena nodded. “He’s just arrived from South Africa, since you visited last. A poor Boer come here looking for work. He’s not stupid that one. Mr. MacKinnon, our farm manager, joined our troops, just like Erik, and the good Lord knows we need the help. No, Mr. Baden is not stupid . . .” Malena’s voice trailed off and her eyes adopted a far-away, transfixed gaze that indicated her unwillingness to speak of unpleasant topics.

“I’m sorry Malena,” Tanya commiserated. “I don’t know how you’ll run the farm without a man, but I have to have him for this supply train. I’m barely managing without having to organize these ox wagons, and —”

“— I quite understand, Tanya,” Malena assured her.

“I don’t know how to do anything —”

“— Surely not, precious, you’re very competent —”

“— I’m utterly helpless! Isak didn’t tell me what to do, or how I’m supposed to run the telegraph machine if I don’t know Morse code, and I don’t know where Isak is or why he doesn’t come, and I can’t get the things Gokal or Kamau need. I have to rely on Hassan, and I don’t know how he seems to solve all problems! That is, when he’s not creating them. Did you know he was ‘renting’ – well, never mind. I can’t even *talk* to Hassan, he has an answer for everything – I feel like an idiot —”

“— We never see ourselves as the good Lord makes us —”

“— and if you don’t give me Mr. Baden, I have no idea what I’ll do, Isak told me to ‘get a man,’ but he didn’t tell me how, and if I don’t have Mr. Baden, I have no recourse, no second-best —”

“— The Holmberg farm will soldier on, Tanya, don’t waste worry on us. The good Lord has already seen fit to test us,” Malena lowered her eyes, “with the assurance of financial loss for this year. I just wonder . . . Mr. Baden, as I said, is not stupid, but he’s not”

Malena’s murmuring evasion piqued Tanya’s interest. “Loyal to the cause?” Tanya hazarded. “He’s a German sympathizer.”

“Oh no!” Malena protested. “I don’t think Mr. Baden takes sides. Not that I know him at all. But I’m not confident that you want Mr. Baden’s assistance.”

“Why?” The more Malena equivocated, the more curious Tanya became. “He’s a coward?”

“I have no reason to believe that,” Malena replied quickly.

“What then?” Tanya exclaimed. “If you harbor some objection to the man, do say so!”

“Oh Tanya, please forgive me,” Malena burst out, rushing over to Tanya and enfolding both her hands in Malena’s own. “Of course, take Mr. Baden. I pray that he’ll be of more use to the cause than he’s been to me.”

“What do you mean?” Tanya asked charily.

“I’ve not had the impression that Mr. Baden is reliable,” said Malena quietly.

“How so?” Tanya pressed.

“Have you seen him today?” Malena asked.

“No.”

“Neither have I,” Malena admitted.

Tanya raised her eyebrows. “Drink?”

“I dare not say,” Malena shook her head and closed her eyes. “I don’t know.

But,” Malena opened her eyes, “now the good Lord has seen fit to prescribe a path and a purpose for Mr. Baden, and we can only pray that he will find within himself the strength to maintain the course —”

“Nonsense, Malena,” Tanya interrupted. “Hassan told me about Baden, and I’ve never known Hassan to be an instrument of the good Lord’s prescriptions. More likely that Baden will be paying Hassan a percentage of whatever money Baden can make or steal off this supply train. But it doesn’t matter. Whatever his drawbacks, so long as Mr. Baden leads the supply train, all will be well enough: our men will have their supplies.”

“You are definite?” Malena confirmed. “You want Mr. Baden for this job?”

“Yes.”

“Then I shall find him and send him to you.”

“Saint Malena,” Tanya thanked her and kissed her cheek. Then, grabbing a stale (but refreshingly mold-free) slice of toast, Tanya donned her hat.

As Tanya mounted Scarlet and whistled for Dionysus, who came bounding around the corner, Malena gathered her courage to ask the question she’d been deferring since Tanya had arrived. “Tanya darling,” Malena called, running from the veranda to where Tanya was poised to ride away, “I know you would have said something if there

was any news, but forgive my poor heart, I can't help myself. Have you heard from Erik?"

Meeting her friend's eye, Tanya felt immediately callow for not having given Erik any but the most passing thought since her arrival on the farm; but the topic of beloved relations was a sore one for Tanya. She tried to swallow back the lump that had just sprung to her throat; she missed Isak. Tanya touched Malena's hand where it clutched at the saddle. "No, Malena, I'm sorry," she answered softly. She feared that if she spoke any more loudly, she would begin to cry.

"I miss him so," Malena murmured, covering her mouth with her hand as if she'd betrayed a sinful thought.

"I'm sure he's safe," Tanya pursed her lips with determination. She took a breath. "I'm sure they're all safe."

Malena nodded and turned her face away to hide her tear-filled eyes.

"We'll both be with our husbands soon," Tanya said with laboured optimism. "We must sacrifice for the cause."

Malena nodded again and sniffled. "Of course, you're right." Then, as Tanya tugged Scarlet's reins to go, Malena burst out, "Wait!"

Tanya pulled Scarlet to a standstill. From the corner of her eye, Tanya could see Malena fumbling. "Your trousers," Malena exclaimed, sliding off the article and thrusting it into Tanya's hands.

Her incredulous laughter almost pitched Tanya out of the saddle. "Malena! What if Ibrahim sees you?"

Eyes daring nervously, Malena whispered, “The good Lord will protect me from all peepers.”

“Better run before He turns His attention back to the war.”

3.

“Memsabu, the Cumberland sauce.”

“Yes, Kamau?” Tanya looked up and shaded her eyes. The afternoon sun, blazing directly behind where Kamau stood in the doorway, rendered him in silhouette.

“For the wild pig, Memsabu. I will cook the sauce.”

Pulling off the telegraph machine headphones, Tanya was detained by the necessity of detangling them from her hair. She was seated in the closet-like telegraph room in the back of the Kijabe railway station. Stray railway ties leaned in the corners.

As soon as she'd returned from Malena's farm and stabled Scarlet, Tanya had ducked in to check on the telegraph machine. She was stunned to discover that it appeared to be working. Morse code was definitely pinging through the line, though she couldn't decipher it. Since Gokal wasn't in the vicinity, the message from Nairobi would have to be resent.

Although Tanya had agreed to Gokal's proposed division of labour with respect to the telegraph machine – he to operate, she to manage – she was increasingly frustrated by the arrangement. In it, she detected the implication that a woman wasn't smart enough to learn Morse code. Such an attitude pressed painfully on the emotional bruises she still carried from her struggle to receive an education on par with that of her brothers. Surely, she reasoned, Morse code cannot be so difficult – Gokal learned it!

Gokal, for his part, had much admiration for Tanya's intelligence. Her conversation consistently challenged and interested him, and she had obviously read many learned books. But Gokal didn't associate knowing Morse code with being smart; Gokal agreed with Tanya's fundamental opinion that any dolt could learn it. Tanya was not a dolt. Nor did Tanya, a white woman and a Baroness, strike Gokal as a logical

recruit for semi-skilled labour. Typically, memsahibs oversaw the labourers. (Of course, Gokal knew of exceptions. He'd seen memsahibs cook and garden, milk cows and pick crops; he'd seen them shoot guns, drive trucks and manage money. But Gokal had never seen a white woman – much less a white noblewoman – labour on a task that she'd been trained to do by an Indian.) The idea of being replaced as telegraph operator by a Baroness was deeply perplexing to Gokal, and he wasn't quite confident that the whole scheme wasn't a trap. And so both Tanya and Gokal remained ignorant.

“Kamau, the telegraph is working,” Tanya stated, baffled.

“Yes, Memsabu,” Kamau replied impatiently.

“I have only been away for four-and-a-half hours,” Tanya murmured. “I've never known them to work this quickly. Have they forgotten that we're in Africa?”

“No, Memsabu.” Kamau hopped lightly from one foot to another.

“Where's Gokal?” Tanya asked. “Nairobi is trying to tell us something.”

“Test message after telegraph line repair, Memsabu,” Kamau replied.

Tanya narrowed her eyes in annoyance at this display of her apparent superfluosness. “Did you need something, Kamau?”

“Memsabu, the Cumberland sauce,” he repeated triumphantly.

“Cumberland sauce.” Tanya registered what Kamau had been saying. Just after dawn, she'd shot a wild pig at a nearby watering hole, and Kamau knew that Tanya like nothing better with pork than Cumberland sauce. His gesture to please was touching and, in light of war time shortages, near sorcery. “But how? Where did you find the port for the sauce?” Tanya asked.

“I traded Hassan for it, Memsabu,” Kamau announced proudly.

“Hassan is a Mohammedan,” Tanya frowned, although she didn’t know for certain that Muslims were prohibited from trading in alcohol, as opposed merely to drinking it. She doubted such refinements of Islamic law would mean much to Hassan anyway. “Where did *he* get the port?” Tanya wondered. A rarity since the war’s outbreak, alcohol had been beyond Tanya’s reach for weeks.

“Memsabu, he got it.”

This statement, Tanya knew, was as elaborate an explanation as she would receive. Tanya couldn’t decide whether language barriers sabotaged her investigatory efforts, or whether obstinacy was the cause, but she had already learned from experience that no amount of repetition or rephrasing of the question would produce a more meaningful answer. Changing tactics, she parried, “What did you trade him for the port?”

“Copper wire, Memsabu,” Kamau answered promptly.

His narrow focus on the Cumberland sauce had blinded Kamau to the explosive potential of this revelation. If she’d been confused by the speed of the telegraph line repair, and surprised by the prospect of the Cumberland sauce, Tanya was absolutely shocked that Kamau had been in casual possession of a commodity as valuable as copper wire. Had Kamau had some inkling of Tanya’s response, he would have drawn out the moment of epiphany for even greater dramatic effect. Nonetheless, as the situation stood, Tanya’s response was fairly gratifying:

“Where —” she sputtered and had to stop for a breath. “Where did you get copper wire, Kamau?”

“Memsabu, I got it.”

* * *

As she approached the wood pile by her tent, Tanya braced herself against the air blast from the incoming train, and she raised her arm to shield her face from the flying particles. When she lowered her arm, she saw a bloated, round-faced sausage of a man standing by her tent. Tanya guessed that he was probably middle-aged, but sun exposure had ravaged his features beyond age identification. His greasy blond hair hung over his eyes, and scabs on his knuckles suggested punching-related activities.

Dionysus, who immediately upon their return to Kijabe had bolted into the surrounding underbrush in pursuit of a genet cat, suddenly materialized by Tanya's tent and growled. "Hush, Dionysus," Tanya chided, and then turning to the man, she asked, "Are you lost? May I help you?"

"Miss Tanya is it?" the man grunted, flexing and unflexing his hands.

"Yes, I am Baroness von Brantberg," Tanya answered, standing as tall as she could – a useless effort, she realized, as she measured her full height at the man's sternum.

"Miss Malena sent me." The man looked sideways guiltily, as if the fact of having been told to do something by Miss Malena was a shameful admission.

"Oh, Mr. Baden!" Tanya exclaimed, having forgotten in her recent conversation with Kamau the pressing urgency of the supply train. At Tanya's exclamation, Dionysus growled anew, this time escalating his throaty expression of displeasure to a bark. "Hush Dionysus!" Tanya scolded.

Unwilling to be dressed down in public, Dionysus bounded away, but not before lavishing on Tanya his most large-eyed wounded look.

Focusing her attention on the last man in Kijabe, Tanya smiled in an attempt to dispel the vaguely threatening atmosphere that Baden's presence, lurking around her tent – and Dionysus' negative reaction – had imparted. When Baden remained indifferent to her smile, Tanya inquired, “Are you ready for an adventure through Masailand, Mr. Baden?”

“Miss?” Baden grunted.

Even allowing that English was probably not Baden's first language, his persistence in addressing her as anything other than “Baroness” irked Tanya. “Mr. Baden,” Tanya adopted an authoritative tone, “you are to set out before dawn tomorrow, from here, in charge of supplies to be delivered to Lord Delamere. I understand that he is camped on the Narosera River. In Masailand.”

“A safari?” Baden grunted, apparently his habitual mode of communication.

“Yes a safari. But it won't be a pleasure trip, I'm afraid. The challenges of a safari through Masailand are, no doubt you aware, very serious. Water, for example – there isn't any. No roads, either. If you break a wagon wheel, you'll be stuck. Obviously, you will not be able to provision spare parts in Masailand. Then there are the lions. They like oxen for dinner and just try to move an ox wagon without oxen. And if the lions don't eat the oxen, they'll eat you. And if they don't kill you, there's elephant, buffalo, rhino, leopard, cheetah and wild dog. And, of course, the Masai themselves are a disgusting and dangerous people. Did you know they drink blood? But the risks are in some sense irrelevant because the journey must be undertaken. For the cause.”

“For money, Miss.”

Baden’s quip reflected a facility with the English language that was more advanced than Tanya had expected. “Money?” she repeated, so taken aback that she forgot to be annoyed about his term of address.

“If Shaka Zulu didn’t finish me in the Anglo-Zulu war, and the British didn’t send me to my Maker in the Boer War, I am not expecting any skinny Masai is going to do me in,” he pronounced, “and lions don’t cause me no pause, either.”

“Well, that’s very encouraging,” Tanya said, nodding agreeably with this confidence.

“But.”

“But?” Tanya prompted him to continue, despite an intuition that she was not going to like what was to follow.

“I didn’t do battle with Shaka Zulu for free —”

“No —”

“And I didn’t take up arms in the Boer War for free —”

“No, I expect not —”

“And I’m not going to run a supply train in this war for free.”

“No, why should you?” Tanya sympathized. “But you have to,” she immediately corrected herself.

“Why’s that?” Baden grunted, folding his arms over his chest.

“For the cause,” Tanya explained.

“What cause?”

“Don’t you start, too!” Tanya wailed. “You’ve been talking to Hassan, of course.”

“Hassan? Who’s that?” Baden grunted with, what Tanya thought to be, questionable credibility.

“We’re all volunteers,” Tanya explained, struggling to maintain control of her voice.

“Plenty of volunteer work for me to do in South Africa. I came here for pay.”

“There’s no money to pay you!”

“*Au weiderschein*, Kraut sympathizer,” Baden grunted and pushed against Tanya.

“Wait!” Tanya shrieked, ignoring the insult and desperately grabbing Baden’s arm. “Mr. Baden, please wait. How much money do you need?”

Baden didn’t shake off Tanya’s hold, but he stared down at her with an expression of contempt that a baboon might cast on a termite. “Four thousand rupees should do,” he grunted.

Tanya gaped. “That’s more money than Malena pays you in a year!”

“No Masai on Miss Malena’s farm, is there?”

“But you said that you weren’t scared of the Masai!” Tanya protested.

“That’s why the price is only four thousand,” he grunted, roughly extricating himself from her grasp.

“It’s impossible,” Tanya cried, scarcely concealing the tremor in her voice.

“*Au weiderschei—*”

“Wait! Wait!” Tanya yelped, throwing herself in his path and holding her arms out to block his passage. “You have to do it Mr. Baden. You *must*.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the last man in Kijabe.”

“Then there’s something more important for me to do than transport supplies,” he grunted and lunged at Tanya, slamming her into the corner of the train station.

The sharp blow of the building against Tanya’s spine knocked her near unconscious, and Tanya staggered around disjointedly for several steps before she realized that Baden’s body was no longer imprisoning her own. Attempting to focus her eyes, she eventually assembled a picture of her surroundings that, though unblurred, was nonetheless inexplicable. She identified Baden, but he seemed to be horizontal, prostrate on his back, although how he came to be in this unexpected position she could not explain. A foot on Baden’s throat offered some clue, but allowing her gaze to roam from the foot, up the leg, over the hip, to the waist, chest, shoulders, and finally to rest on the handsome countenance of her rescuer revealed what could only be ghost or vision. Tanya shook her head in wonder as she goggled at the apparition of Hilary Gordon, youngest son of the Earl of Chillon.

But events were proceeding at a pace more rapid than Tanya could fathom. She heard the sound of a pistol cocking and realized that the apparition of Hilary Gordon was wielding the weapon. Then the apparition did something well beyond the scope of capacities that apparitions typically possessed (at least in Tanya’s understanding of such matters): it yelled.

“I will murder you,” came the impassioned cry – and Tanya was amazed at the apparition’s ability to mimic Hilary’s voice (so lifelike!), “if your pestilent hide remains in British territory by dawn.”

Tanya wracked her memory of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* – her main source of information about apparitions, wraiths and the like – for an explanation of why this ghost was able to yell. Had not the Ancient Mariner's apparitions been silent?

This seraph-band, each waved his hand,
No voice did they impart —
No voice; but oh! The silence sank
Like music on my heart.

Hilary had read the poem to her, taught her to love it, taught her to know it by heart – and so she was sure that apparitions, whether singly or in bands, didn't yell; they waved their hands silently.

But no silence sank like music on Tanya's heart. Instead two shots – expertly placed to shear the cartilage off the tops of each of Baden's ears – wrung a scream out of Tanya. Then, with the yelling and shots that followed – Hilary admonishing Baden to run, and then shooting at the ground around Baden's heels – Tanya concluded that she was mistaken in thinking she'd been seeing the apparition of Hilary Gordon. She'd been visited by the man in the flesh.

And then his lips were on her forehead, and his arm was around her waist. “Brave Titania,” he murmured, twinning Tanya with the Queen of the Fairies in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* – a nickname he'd last uttered ten years earlier. Brushing her hair off her forehead, he continued, “You're all right?” he asked, pulling away to examine her face.

Far from all right, Tanya was quaking with emotions too intense to be pleasant. “I thought I'd never see you after I left Paris,” she forced out of her throat as she willed herself not to tremble.

Hilary grinned impishly and clapped his hands around her upper arms. A lock of curly brown hair flopped onto his brow. “Never see me again? After all the Shelley that passed between us?” And then he passed some more:

Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
Why not I with thine?—

Tanya blinked, scandalized by his implication. “I’m not single. I married a Baron.”

“I heard,” he replied dispiritedly.

“What are you doing in British East Africa?” Tanya asked roughly.

“Fighting a war, sad to say. Thomas, my brother, in Europe, and me here, we’re both soldiering. Boring as public school, but I can’t play hooky because I’m second-in-command of Cole’s Scouts. Number one after Cole, you know. Thankless job, commanding Somalis. But they’re the ‘scouts,’ poor devils, so my job would be even more useless without them. We just arrived on the train.” Then, seeing her increasingly shattered expression, he urged, “Come, come, transparent Titania! Through thy bosom I see thy heart,” he declared, switching from Shelley to Shakespeare. “You are not all right. You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine!” Tanya snapped. “Tell me,” she said, taking a deep breath and steadying herself against the side of the train station, “why you chased off the only man who can lead the supply train that is departing tomorrow to provision Lord Delamere’s unit in Masailand?”

“Because he thought rape was part of the job, Titania,” Hilary retorted amusedly.

“Stop calling me Titania!” Tanya ordered. “I’m Baroness von Brantberg!”

“Baroness,” Hilary bowed his head and stepped backwards, “I beg your pardon. Arriving in Kijabe, the nice Indian stationmaster mentioned the presence of a woman who I once had the pleasure of knowing, and I sought her out to pay my respects. If I can be of any service, please do not hesitate to say so.”

“You can take the ox wagons to Lord Delamere,” Tanya suggested.

Hilary weighed the proposition. “Our orders are to report to the Besil River fort immediately,” he said apologetically. “Obviously I couldn’t leave my company, much as I’d like to, and we cannot divert the entire company to deliver the supplies. I am truly sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Tanya replied, raising her chin defiantly. “I don’t need any help from you, Hilary Gordon. I never did, and I don’t now.”

“I understand,” he said quietly.

“No, you don’t,” Tanya insisted. “You can’t. You’re not a serious person. You’re just a troublesome dilettante with a talent for walking in on embarrassing situations. So – I beg you – save your trouble for the Germans and walk out.”

“As you wish, Baroness.”

Hilary vanished so quickly and silently that, alone in the dusk, watching the engorged sun yield to the allure of the mountainous horizon, Tanya began to wonder again if she’d seen a ghost. With the incoming night, Tanya felt the thick tangle of creepers, weeds and thorns encroaching from the boundary around the railway. The towering escarpment, which on some evenings had made her feel safely nested in the bosom of a tender giant, struck her now as a personal humiliation, reducing her as it did not merely to meager height and disfavored gender, but to total insignificance. Tanya

shivered with a sensation that seemed like fear. Imagine meeting Hilary Gordon in Kijabe! After all these years . . .

. . . Paris still possessed a claim on her passions that she hated to acknowledge.

After their juvenile delinquencies in Paris, she and Hilary had (in Coleridge's phrasing),

. . . stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
A dreary sea now flows between;—
But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away, I ween,
The marks of that which once had been.

Time was supposed to have weakened the power of her past connections until the chains that had bound her to Hilary snapped or rusted apart; but time seemed to have been neglecting its duties.

Of course, time might be lazy, but Tanya knew that she bore a teeny bit of the blame, too. She'd been so mulishly adamant about being educated. She'd carped and complained about the unfairness of leaving her mind fallow until her mother had sent her to art school in Paris – a compromise. If only Tanya hadn't accepted! Art school was a stupid compromise: she hadn't learned anything, not even to draw properly, since all the women students were banned from the classes that used live models (who were female!).

And if she hadn't compromised on art school, she wouldn't have gone to Paris, and then she wouldn't have met Hilary, on his European tour, fresh from Oxford and eager for a pupil of his own. Tanya was such a hungry pupil and, as Byron had foretold, "glances beget ogles, ogles sighs," and so on.

But, as Byron's verse ends with "broken vows and hearts and heads," far better for Tanya's hunger to have gone unattended, unnamed and unsated than for her to have feasted with Hilary Gordon. If she hadn't gone to art school, at least she wouldn't have

learned how uneducated she really was; nor would she have learned the little she did know of literature, poetry, music, painting, sculpture, geography, history, classics, sports and the tactile arts – topics about which Hilary seemed to know everything.

And, if she hadn't gone to art school, she wouldn't have met Grigory.

Grigory. Prince Grigory Kropotkin-Oblomov. A verse-inclined crocodile would be easier to find than a man less poetic than Prince Grigory, but how tempting was the notion of being a princess! What greater culmination of Tanya's Romantic sensibility than to lead a life devoted to art, the welfare of peasants, and a temperamental, heavy-drinking *prince*? Most importantly, how jealous Hilary was of Grigory!

Of course, the role that Tanya's provocation of Hilary played in the ultimate rupture of their relations wasn't a matter about which Tanya showed particular interest. As far as she was concerned, the problem was Hilary's non-serious nature, which had caused him to fail to grasp the gravity of his offense, walking in on the intimate scene between Tanya and Prince Grigory.

Dionysus nosed his way out from the dusky undergrowth and trotted up to Tanya. Thorn apple burs were stuck in his wiry coat, and a wayward vine of creeping groundsel made an improvised wreath around his ears. Licking her hand, Dionysus presented himself for curfew. The warm, textured tongue against her palm coaxed Tanya back to Kijabe and, slowly, to the reality of her circumstances: she'd spent the entire day wheedling, ordering and begging, but she still didn't have a man to lead the supply train.

* * *

“Memsabu, it is very good you come,” Kamau greeted Malena, as Malena dismounted from her horse, Pancake, tied his reins, and gave him a pat on the nose.

“I hate to ride after dark,” Malena said, walking with Kamau towards Tanya’s tent, “but thankfully the good Lord saw fit to give me half a moon on a cloudless night. I was worried when Mr. Baden did not send word or return to the farm, but then I thought I would come find him and ask him to convey a message to Bwana Erik when he sees him.”

Kamau, who had been cooking during the entirety of Baden’s misadventure at the Kijabe railway station – and who consequently neither understood nor cared what Malena was talking about – repeated himself: “Memsabu, it is very good you come.”

A melodramatic resonance in his voice caused Malena to stop and face him. “Nothing is wrong, Kamau, is it?” she asked anxiously.

“Memsabu is not eating her wild pig with Cumberland sauce,” Kamau replied gravely.

Malena repressed a smile. These native servants were adorable! Like little children, they so strenuously needed one’s approval of their efforts. Poor Kamau had no doubt toiled mightily over his pig and sauce, and Malena pitied him: he would never comprehend the rationale of a woman obsessed with her waistline, for whom the most favored and beloved dishes were often the most damaging.

Having had experience with the vagaries of Tanya’s appetite, Malena saw no cause for anxiety in Kamau’s report. Looking at a hippopotamus could provoke Tanya to skip meals for a week, and Tanya had fasted almost to the point of fainting after Isak had

made a drunken – but fond – reference to his wife’s “full bottom” when they’d been on their hunting safari in March.

While the news that Tanya was now apparently fasting did not suggest a happy disposition, Malena had no curiosity about the cause of Tanya’s unhappiness, attributing it to Tanya’s regular neurosis about her womanly shape. Because Malena also did not ascribe to Kamau the capability of making astute observations about Tanya’s psychological state by reference to her eating patterns, Malena was caught off guard by the shriveled figure collapsed against a log by the campfire, a plate of untouched food at her side.

“Tanya darling,” Malena called, kneeling next to her friend. “What ever is the matter?”

“Oh Malena,” Tanya moaned, almost falling into Malena’s arms.

Malena embraced her and then seated herself so Tanya could rest her head on Malena’s shoulder. “Tell me anything but that the pig and Cumberland sauce is inedible,” Malena murmured and then, lowering her voice even further, “I don’t think our kind Savior has given Kamau the strength to receive a bad review of his cooking.”

“What are you talking about,” Tanya muttered. “Kamau has been very sweet today. The food is delicious. He’s a culinary genius. Have you eaten?”

“No, I set out in the late afternoon because I hoped to arrive here before dark.”

“Then you must eat, Malena, don’t let it go to waste please. Waste in war time disserves the cause.”

Accepting the plate gratefully – Malena was, in fact, famished, a state heightened to the point of discomfort by the food’s rich smells – Malena asked, “But why aren’t you eating Tanya?”

Choking back her urge to confide in Malena about Hilary, Tanya opted instead for an explanation both true and evasive: “This supply train is grieving me endlessly.”

Malena took the opportunity of chewing and swallowing to hide her relief. Her first thought upon seeing Tanya had been that Isak had fallen on the battlefield. She was pleased to learn that Tanya was merely overreacting to the regular obstacles with which the good Lord assists us in maintaining our resilience. “But why, Tanya? Surely the supplies are Mr. Baden’s concern.”

“Your Mr. Baden will be halfway back to Cape Town by now,” Tanya snorted. “As you said, he’s not stupid.”

Malena put down her fork. “Tanya, what happened? Tell me instantly.”

“Oh don’t worry, Malena. It’s not your fault. No, Mr. Baden encountered a deranged soldier, who shot off Mr. Baden’s ears.”

“Oh how terrible!” Malena exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hand. But, as she listened to the sound of wood crackling in the fire, Malena found that she could not repress her growing smile. Removing her hand from her mouth, she confessed, “Tanya, I am a sinner. This is horrible of me, but . . .”

Tanya glanced at Malena inquisitively. “What is it Malena?”

“I can’t help thinking that Mr. Baden now looks like one of those Masai with holes in his ears!”

Tanya and Malena stared at each other for a moment before they succumbed to simultaneous giggles. The Masai *moran* – young warriors – widened circles in their ear lobes, so that in extreme cases the lobes hung down to their shoulders. Staring at the empty space between the now-stringy lobe and the remaining ear was always a flinch-worthy and scary experience, which made the opportunity for laughter even more gratifying.

Covering her eyes with her hands, Tanya corrected Malena on the particulars, “No, no, not like the Masai, Malena. Mr. Baden’s ear lobes are intact. It’s the tops of his ears that are gone.”

“My goodness, fancy shooting!” Malena marveled.

“A waste of bullets,” Tanya sniffed. “I have not witnessed a greater misuse of ammunition. Why you’d think that soldier thought ammunition supplies were at their pre-war abundance! A real disservice to the cause he is.”

Malena was taken aback by Tanya’s outburst, so she concentrated on eating. The food really was expertly prepared. The wild pig had been dressed with garlic and wild herbs and roasted in a pot that Kamau had buried over a bed of hot coals until the meat was tender enough to eat with a spoon. As for the much-vaunted Cumberland sauce, the dried currants, apricots and sultanas, plumped with the rich reduction of wild pork drippings and port, combined to produce a concoction that, Malena felt, could induce even a Mohammedan during Ramadan – even Buddha under the banyan tree! – to break his fast with relish. “These sultanas are delicious! Tanya,” gushed Malena, trying for a fresh conversational direction, “where did Kamau get the dry fruit?”

“The last of our stores at the plantation,” Tanya mumbled.

“And the port?”

The groan that Tanya emitted reverberated with such misery that Malena’s hands shook. The source, Malena concluded, must be profound suffering. In a gentle tone, she urged, “Confide in me, Tanya darling, what is it?”

Tanya’s refusal to name the cause was not, ultimately, a function of distrust of Malena. In truth, Tanya was simply incapable of admitting, even to herself, that the reappearance of Hilary Gordon had undone the knot of her life. She realized that she was unusually despondent, but – to the extent that she found any cause for her melancholia – she assumed it was the guilt of having to delay the supply wagons until she accomplished the impossible: finding another man. “Our husbands are going to starve before I enlist a man to take those supply wagons to Lord Delamere, Malena, and their suffering is my fault.”

“Oh no, Tanya.” Malena stopped chewing and shook her head. “No dearest.”

“Who else’s fault is it? Isak told me to find a man, and I’ve failed.” Tanya sighed heavily and leaned her head against her hands. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. Mr. Baden was the last man in Kijabe.”

Malena watched Tanya struggle against tears. Then, putting her plate aside, Malena said, “Thank you for that meal, Tanya. It was so generous of you to share your food with me, and those truly were the most delicious victuals I have tasted in British East Africa.”

Tanya shrugged. “You have certainly fed me when food was dear.”

“And because I now know of Kamau’s impressive skills and therefore have no desire to be too far from him, I have an idea.” Malena paused to gather the courage to speak her audacious proposal: “Why don’t we both go on the safari?”

“What safari?” Tanya asked, too tired and confused by Malena’s roundabout approach.

“Let’s go together to Lord Delamere. Oh let’s do it, Tanya. Two women have to be near as good as one man, and we can keep each other company. And then I can see Erik!”

Taken aback by Malena’s bold proposal, Tanya raised her eyebrows. “We can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Isak told me to get a man.”

“There isn’t one.”

“But we can’t go – there are lions.”

“You’ll shoot them.”

“I can’t shoot lions!”

“You’ve done it before.”

“Yes, with Isak next to me.”

“We’ll avoid the lions.”

“We can’t avoid the Masai.”

“The Masai are on excellent terms with Lord Delamere.”

“We’re not Lord Delamere!”

“But we’re going to meet him.”

“We could get caught in fighting between the British and the Germans.”

“A hardship I’ll happily endure for Erik. Oh, I know you’ll do the same for Isak!”

“I can’t lead a supply train.”

“Of course you can!”

“No, I can’t, Malena. I’m not good enough. No one listens to me. I don’t know what to do.”

“Ridiculous, Tanya. Look what an admirable job you’re doing in Kijabe!”

“Unwarranted praise, and that’s another problem: I can’t leave Kijabe.”

“What are you doing here that’s more important than delivering food to our husbands? Oh let’s do it, Tanya. Let’s bring succor to our husbands!”

Tanya considered the expression of ecstatic enthusiasm on Malena’s face. Love was driving Malena into this rapture. Tanya recognized the symptoms. For Isak, Tanya had thus far gone anywhere, done anything, changed herself in any way. Love had already molded her into a wife bearing little resemblance to her unmarried incarnation.

Guided by Malena’s example, Tanya relaxed her grip on her fears enough so that she could capitulate to love; and if love had made her manager of a military telegraph station, why shouldn’t it recast her, again, as a supply train leader? “All right, Malena.”

“Truly?”

“Truly. It will be fun.”

“Oh Tanya!” Malena clapped her hands together as if about to engage in fervent prayer. Envisioning Erik enfolding her in his arms, Malena smiled up at the night sky, a diamond-crowded canopy of black velvet that reflected back in her joyous eyes.

More earthbound in her outlook, Tanya looked away and sighed. She'd said, "It will be fun," impulsively – as a way to invoke Isak and his blessing for their journey – but she didn't believe it. Far from anticipating an enjoyable adventure, Tanya felt that she was heading off a map into an unknown – which would be scary enough, but Tanya also intuited that acquaintance with this unknown was not going to be a happy event.

Well, at least, she consoled herself, if I die on this supply mission I'll never again see Hilary Gordon.