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Bear's Change

The joke around the West Africa missions was that Amos Masterson loved God and hated spreadsheets in equal measure. The morning was hot. Morning in Amos' neck of southern Mali was generally hot. He was in the pharmacy, wrestling with the inventory, when a handful of boys came running from the river. Fear equalized them. The terror he heard in their voices, the terror he saw on their faces when he stepped out onto the veranda, did not distinguish their conflicting faiths. Dust imprinted the same fine grain in the sweat runnels on the bodies of all of them. A vision, that. It fell to Amos to resist it.

He was no linguist. Under stress his Bambara tended to deteriorate, and the boys' French was nominal. He lost several precious minutes figuring out what had happened. By the time he got it, Dr. Sissoko was already sprinting toward the old Land Cruiser with her black medical bag. He ran to catch up.

"Now you must drive rather fast, Bear," she told him calmly, and he tore off toward the river, tires spraying sand.

A famous crocodile had come up under a fishing boat. The croc was legendary up and down the big brown river. Christians and Muslims alike credited it with killing generations of the unwary, its murderous exploits stretching back into a past whose horizon was a blur of the imagination. Now, with a single shrug of its mighty back, the creature had capsized a beanpole boat. The two men onboard managed to dog-paddle to shore and were pulled to safety by onlookers. But the boy out fishing with them, Hamza, had been swatted by the beast's tail, which had its separate power to crush. A young man onshore bravely crashed into the water and dragged Hamza out of the water screaming.

His heroic action traumatized the rescuer. When Bear and the doctor pulled up, he was still standing on the bank in a pair of purple gym shorts, muscular chest heaving, seized by a vacancy that blocked his fear. He looked like a boxer after an uppercut that connected.

Amos knew Hamza by sight. For some reason, any time he crossed paths with the American, the boy came to an awkward halt, then stood there holding one foot up in the stirrup of his cupped hand, bobbing his head like a bird and chanting nonsense syllables. What had his parents told him about the Christian clinic?

Whatever they might think, there was no doubt that Dr. Sissoko saved their son's life and leg. Although he was a pharmacist, Amos had picked up nursing essentials since coming to Africa and was able to be useful. They set up a portable operating table in a grove of delicately green trees whose roots drank river water, and Mariam went to work. At her direction, he swabbed at the blood welling from the frayed muscles of the boy's thigh while she pieced the flesh together, placed a drain, and gently drew the skin back over the flayed upper leg. Her sutures followed the zigzag pattern made by the croc's slashing tail.

Bad news traveled fast, and a crowd gathered. For the most part, Christians and Muslims kept to themselves, although some of the younger kids mingled. In the ten years that Amos had been at the mission, tensions between the two groups had risen steadily. Coexistence was an evil flower, to be denied sunlight, water, anything a plant needed to thrive. The Muslims had numbers on their side, and momentum.

Hamza's parents were in the crowd under the trees, surrounded by family. Fear buckled his mother's legs, and throughout the operation two women held her up. Her rhythmic moaning got inside Amos. It brought on one of those moments.

The longer he stayed in Mali, the more often such moments came. In the beginning, he wrote them off to sensory overload and the stress of being foreign. The African brilliance of the sun, its ravishing assault on his skin. A sense of well-being that streamed through him like light or like air but was neither of those. The whispering narcosis of language sounds he was not born to. In all of it he felt the pull of the exotic, about which he and Prudence had been warned even before they came to Africa. The Devil took great care, painting his nails.

Lately he sensed a change. The moments became doors through which he was invited to step. Duty, discipline, the hard-won desire of his heart—they all told him to slam the doors shut, pray them away. It was not pride that kept him on the threshold

of perception, it was an unfamiliar hunger, like discovering he had another mouth. Still, none of this worried him unduly. Whatever was happening, it was not a crisis of faith.

After Hamza was stabilized, Dr. Sissoko spoke with his parents. Best for their son, she explained, was staying at the clinic where they could watch for fever, keep him comfortable, make sure he mended properly. She knew that would set off a fury of discussion, and it did. Amos cut through the noisy confusion, announcing in a calm voice, "We will respect the boy's faith."

This was out of character. It appeared to cut across his missionary grain and surprised everybody, but it tipped the balance. Hamza's parents acquiesced, although they would not be persuaded to ride with their son in the Land Cruiser back to the clinic. Amos had the sense that they were giving him up for dead, never mind the successful operation he had just undergone. He helped Dr. Sissoko arrange Hamza in the back seat. The Land Cruiser started; a piece of luck. It ought to have been scrapped. He drove carefully, an eye on the dispersing crowd from which a child might dart into their path. Ten minutes later, as he slowed to negotiate a bend in the road, Mariam looked over at him.

"Mali has changed you, Tueur d'ours."

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Evenings were difficult for Amos since Prudence went home. Her faith, unfathomably deeper than his, had been the foundation of their decision to leave America and give what remained of them to give, once their boys were grown and gone. It had been the right decision for her to go back to Binghamton even if her father's dementia had not taken over her parents' lives. Enmity between Muslims and Christians was complicating the work of the mission, and Pru's quietly dramatic impulse to confront led her to seek harm's way.

There had been threats, some muffled, all of them hard to decipher. A violent confrontation had taken place in a village not a hundred kilometers from the mission. They were obliged to adopt security protocols and conduct drills. Amos found the drills repugnant but recognized they were necessary. Six months ago Ford Pederson, who oversaw the West Africa missions, had

flown down in the Cessna to offer a tactical retreat. *I cannot believe that, here and now, God seeks your martyrdom*, Ford told him. He was from Oklahoma and wore alligator-skin cowboy boots, although in his life back home he had been an accountant and part-time flight instructor. Africa had seasoned him nicely. He would last a long time.

“Church in Cimarron County, they’re raising money for a new vehicle. Got a ways to go, as I understand it. But that money comes through, you’ll have something you can drive out of trouble if need be, which God willing it won’t be.”

Amos chose to stay. In Binghamton, Prudence agreed. Ford, carrying with him the authority of the governing board, consented. For now. When they prayed together over the decision, a lassitude settled on Amos. It had the contours of peace but not its steady beating heart.

“Perhaps you think me brazen,” Mariam said now, coming onto the veranda, which was roofed and screened for bugs.

Dinner was done and the work of the day. Insects celebrated the evening glow. Hamza and a woman with a complicated pregnancy were resting in the clinic. Georgette, who cooked and cleaned with Jesus on her lips so often it was a trial to Amos, was in her room. This was the hour that Amos and Prudence had been accustomed to taking together.

Amos shook his head. “I’m glad for the company.”

The doctor took a seat. “You’ve seen him out there, have you not?”

A tall man with splayed feet, wearing a cream-colored robe that had a ceremonial look, was doing a poor job disguising his presence out past the cluster of modest houses in which staff lived, past the vegetable gardens, on the periphery of mission property where their patient cultivation ended, scrub took over, and wild dogs hunted in packs.

“I’ve seen him,” Amos admitted.

“A cousin of Hamza’s. The family has designated him watchman. He will stay as long as the boy is with us.”

“I asked Georgette to take him something to eat.”

“I wonder whether he will accept our food.”

“I hope so. I told Georgette to double our regular dose of poison.”

He loved her laugh. It gratified him daily. Mariam Sissoko was

forty. Her father, also a physician, had once been minister of health in Bamako. She was his only child, and it cost him his heart to send her all the way to England to study medicine. He died in the last month of her residency at Leeds. The loss devastated her. Amos believed it was a factor, in a way he would not presume to understand, in her decision to stay single. She was chunky and solid, with a low center of gravity betokening dependability. Adversity would not bowl this woman down. As her laugh gratified Amos' ear, so her complexly brown skin did his eye some necessary good every day that went by.

She had been at the mission three years. His attraction to her began the day she arrived. He dealt with it as he would a head cold, waiting it out, treating the symptoms with prayer and self-awareness. There was nothing new in an older man's attraction to a younger woman, nothing new in the temptation to sin. It was the kind of thing he might be expected to discuss with Ford. And here, yes, pride did in fact enter in. He kept his trouble to himself. Confessing his weakness to Prudence had seemed cruel, and he did not. As for Mariam, he gave her no reason to feel uncomfortable.

"A new bear story is circulating," she told him.

"Among the Muslims."

She nodded.

His first month at *Maison de l'Amour Divin*, Amos tried to tell a story about his grandmother, a family hero. Grandma Nellie once shot a bear that climbed her back porch steps, its bloody jaw swinging slack, enraged by pain. She was cool-headed, intrepid, and fatal to the bear. Amos was not equal to narration, at that point, in either Bambara or French. His listeners went away with the idea that he himself had slain eight or ten slobbering monsters of the American wilds.

They dubbed him *Tueur d'ours*. Bear Killer. For a long time he had done his best to set the record straight. He got nowhere. It pleased people to think of the mild-faced, balding pharmacist as an intrepid slayer of exotic beasts. Over the years as the story reverberated, and he went from being Bear Killer to simply Bear, he grew to accept the name, even to like it. Lately when his sons sent him emails they addressed him as Papa Bear.

Mariam said, "The story is quite clever, the way it summarizes your ursine qualities. Do you want to hear it?"

“I suppose I do.”

“At night, under cover of darkness, you take on your *ours* shape and go across the country terrorizing all and sundry. You trample crops, you abduct children, you violate women. As the night fails and the sun rises, your bear identity vanishes and you regain the appearance of an ordinary human being.”

“So it’s not hippos doing damage in the fields, it’s the pharmacist.”

“The story is convenient,” Mariam said.

She meant that any outlandish thing that could be said of the Christian missionaries would be useful in the ongoing argument against their presence.

“Today,” he said. “What you told me. That Mali has changed me.”

This was unwise. Amos had no explanation for it, and no excuse. Personal conversations of the sort he longed to have this moment with Mariam were not quite taboo. But they were a breach of the discipline his faith demanded, his training inculcated, his every instinct warned him against. It was sheer self-indulgence.

Mariam said quietly, “You told them we will respect the boy’s faith.”

“Was I wrong?”

She shook her head. The conversation did not bother her in the slightest. In fact she was enjoying it, naturally and without compunction. It was one more difference that divided them and drew him to her.

“They saw a concession on your part intended to save the boy. A humane gesture.”

“But you saw something else.”

A barely perceptible nod revealed her internal elegance, to which he should not be privy.

“I saw,” she said slowly, “a man who has learned to appreciate certain things he might not be expected to appreciate.”

When it was too late, he recognized this as the pivotal moment. He wanted—no, he needed—someone to understand what he was going through. Of course it would be Mariam. She had lived in a country not her own. She knew the strange intimacy of otherness.

Enough. Warning bells clanged in Amos’ head. He stood up, putting an end to the moment of candor between them.

Later that night, she sent Georgette to wake him. He joined her in the clinic.

"His fever has spiked," she explained. "I can't seem to bring it down."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want a helicopter. In Bamako, I would feel confident. But I am wondering if we should let his parents know. Just in case."

In the half-light her pale blue scrubs gave her a mellow, reassuring appearance that made Amos want to look, and look away. On a cot, Hamza shook his head and moaned.

"Let's wait," Amos told Mariam.

He was not temporizing. He believed in the power of prayer and took himself away to ask God to lend his attention to one small Muslim boy whose body had been ravaged by a crocodile in the Niger River. At dawn, in the red glow just before the sun's African eye broke the horizon, the fever broke.

Abdulaziz. That was the name of Hamza's family watchman. How he learned of the boy's spiking fever that night was one of ten thousand Malian things Amos would never know. He suspected Georgette, who might imagine telling him was her Christian duty to truth, but there was nothing to be gained by interrogating her. Abdulaziz disappeared. Two hours later, Hamza's parents showed up. Amos and Mariam met them in the dust of the yard in front of the clinic, where the couple avoided looking at the modest wooden cross affixed to the ridge beam of the church roof. Mariam spoke patiently with them, spoke respectfully. It did no good. They took the boy with them, the father hauling him on his back.

"It is too soon," Mariam told Amos. "He should stay here with us."

Was it wrong to feel the solidarity with her that was coursing through him?

Once the heat of the afternoon passed, Dr. Sissoko made up her mind to walk to a Christian village, seven or eight kilometers away, to inoculate the children. She had already done the hard work, convincing the villagers to trust her. Neither their common religion nor the color of her skin was a guarantee. Amos offered to walk with her. In the mind-made-up manner with which she refused his company, he sensed her awareness of hazard. They must not grow close. Instead she took Georgette's young daughter, Damzel, with her. They would spend the night in the

village. Watching them walk away, Damzel holding Mariam's hand and chattering, Amos felt abandoned. He was angry with himself for feeling that way, for being the man he was.

It was time to Skype. The mission had a satellite connection, often precarious. Amos and Prudence had agreed that once a week was enough. The unreal reality of their pixelated selves was its own peculiar trial. On Amos' end, America-by-Skype somehow diminished Africa, reducing it to anecdote. On her end, Prudence found that the calls intensified the overwhelming distance separating them. He went to the office and waited for the telltale ring, which tended to unsettle him.

Their conversations followed a pattern that was not quite a script. Grandkid talk, and then a summary of Pru's parents' health. This time, Amos filled her in on the crocodile attack, Hamza's fever, his father's carrying him off to safety like a sack of . . . millet. The conversation always ended in prayer. It helped both of them. It fell to Pru to choose the verses on which they would meditate. Finger on the page, she squinted at the screen.

"Is something wrong, Amos? You seem distracted."

Trying to explain anything across cyberspace was foolhardy.

"I didn't sleep much last night. Because of the sick boy."

She accepted his explanation. Her knowledge of Scripture was a wonder. Amos had been raised lackadaisically Catholic. When they met in college, her easy familiarity with both Testaments had dazzled him. His first conversion had been to her. His surrender to the Christian faith to whose majesty she introduced him was slower, at times halting, but finally a thorough transformation. The self he discarded was a paltry thing.

"Ephesians two nineteen," she said.

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.

When they ended the call, he continued to sit in front of the computer, an image of his wife lingering on the inside of his eyelids. Age lines accentuated the severity of her face. Her long hair was more blonde than gray, her eyes the lightest possible shade of blue. What had she done to make him feel this resentment? The question surprised and appalled him. So did the resentment itself. He had not been aware of it. He thought hard about calling Ford, telling him he needed to talk. Didn't. That night, the barking of hyenas woke him. They were out in the

scrub in a frenzy of pleasure over carrion. He lay in bed on his back, listening. This, precisely this, was the world God had created. Only the lost would wonder why.

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How old did you have to get before sex dreams stopped tormenting you? In the morning he had an erection. He was slightly disappointed at how quickly it went away but nevertheless relieved. The morning went by quickly. He led the staff in prayer, mediated a dispute over laundry between Georgette and a new woman, Claudine, who thought a withered hand ought to exempt her from the strenuous parts of certain chores. Amos was handy with tools and worked with Mainard to repair broken screens in two of the staff houses. Then here was Mariam, coated with road dust, and the problem they faced together was how to report what had happened.

Yesterday, midway between the mission and the village, she and Damzel had been surrounded by ten angry young Muslim men. Reasons for their anger abounded. They lacked work. They lacked a future, a map, a destination. They were hungry for more, for different, for better. All this while Muslims across the world were being murdered for their faith. They had had enough.

“It might have gone farther than it did,” Mariam told Amos.

“Why didn’t it?”

She frowned. They were sitting in her office. She had showered and released the woman with the difficult pregnancy. “There is something in those young men,” she said, “something that stopped them from hurting us.”

Amos wanted to know what. She chose her words with care.

“Something human. Of course it comes from God, but it is a human instinct that must be protected. Somehow, it must be encouraged. If it is not . . .” She shrugged.

“You were there, Mariam. You should be the one to tell Ford.”

A pole fan pushed hot air around the cramped office. She shook her head. She was not deferring to him. Her father had not raised her to defer. She was acknowledging her trust in his judgment.

Neither of them wanted to report the incident. Telling Ford

raised the likelihood that they would be ordered to leave the mission. It was just as clear that they had no choice. Amos looked at her. In the firmness with which she met his gaze and held it, there was complicity. In their complicity, around the invisible edges, there was desire. It sobered him. He believed it would die a natural death.

She sat across from him as he called Ford on the computer. When the screen came alive, the regional director was chewing a pencil as though it were a blade of Oklahoma grass. He grinned.

“Another country heard from. Something tells me this is not a social call.”

Amos told him about the incident. Ford put sharp questions to Mariam.

“I just came from the embassy,” he told them. “They activated the warden system. Seems things are pretty generally heating up.”

Amos asked him, “What did they tell you?”

Ford grimaced. His lips were leather. “You know how those people are. They don’t tell you as much as they know, never mind the rule.”

The embassy operated under a protocol they called No Double Standard. If they learned of a threat, as an American citizen you were supposed to learn about it, too.

“Are you worried?” Dr. Sissoko asked him.

“It’s my job to worry, Doc. Board meeting tomorrow. What you just told me, we’ll factor it in.”

“For what it’s worth,” Amos began.

Ford raised his hand, cutting him off. “All due respect, Amos. I know, we all know, you and Dr. Sissoko want to stay. We’ll take it one step at a time. Your people, everybody got someplace to go and a way to get there?”

They talked logistics for a few minutes. Amos did his best to stave off the sensation of devastation impending over him. When the conversation was over, Mariam told him, “I will take a walk.”

It was neither invitation nor rebuff. They took the sandy, badly graded road that went to the river. A kilometer down, they reached a mosque. It had gone up three years ago, about the time the doctor had come to the mission, a humble structure of mud walls topped by a small silver dome. In the brass sun of afternoon, a silver glint blinded the eye. No minaret, but the wood trim and the door frame were cleanly green. There was no one around.

“You like it,” Mariam said.

“It’s the simplicity,” he admitted. He hesitated before adding, “Maybe I should leave Mali for a while.”

“Is that what you want?”

“What I want,” he told her, discovering the truth as the words shaped themselves, “is for nothing to change.”

It was a ridiculous thing to wish for. No change meant the continuance of a poor country in which a tiny minority of Christians were threatened by a surging Islam. A mission that was perpetually teetering on financial collapse. Children with bare feet into which disease-bearing insects doggedly burrowed. Women whose gnarled hands were badges signifying the excessive amount of work they did. Men with jaundiced eyes telling each other stories meant to provoke an ugly reaction. Hippos that destroyed the labor of months in one night of marauding. A crocodile that swam through the dark waters of people’s dreams.

“What you want,” said Mariam.

“Yes?”

“It seems unchristian.”

He nodded. In the hot stillness, both of them stared at the mosque. A small black bird lit on the branch of a tree in the yard, making a repetitive chipping sound. It flicked a long tail. *In this place*, Amos heard a small interior voice propound, *this is where beauty lives*.

“And yet,” Mariam said slowly, “it also seems to me to proceed from a kind of love.”

Amos shook his head. It was necessary to insist. “What I said. What I want. It’s wrong.”

Which, he struggled to understand, made it incomprehensibly right.

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Dr. Sissoko disliked driving their wreck of a vehicle, which broke down as often as it ran. But she would not let Amos go with her to Hamza’s village. Word had come through Abdulaziz, whose face was chiseled in permanent censure, that the boy’s fever had gone back up, he was raving, the pain was more than any of them could bear. Mariam judged that the presence of an American missionary in Hamza’s village would be inflammatory just now.

She drove herself, taking Mainard along. Mainard was not local. He had washed up at the mission after losing his family in a bus accident near the Senegalese border. He said little, worked a lot, prayed in a singsong cadence that moved Amos.

Two hours later they were back, with Hamza in the back seat as before. They moved him into the clinic, where he dozed restlessly. Amos was there when he came to himself, saw the American, and screamed. Mariam looked over at Amos, unwilling to ask him to leave the room.

“There is a sepsis,” she told him. “For a reason I cannot yet identify, his body lacks resistance. He is vulnerable.”

Amos left.

That evening Abdulaziz returned to his watchman post. He paced the space beyond the garden like a soldier, kicking a chicken when it crossed his angry path. The chicken squawked and fluttered. The sun went down. *Don't take this away from me*, Amos heard himself plead. Not to God. He knew better than to tender an improper request. When he went to sleep, he prayed for Hamza, and then for clarity.

Neither prayer was answered the way it might have been. Dr. Sissoko sat up through the night with Hamza, doing everything that could be done. Everything was not enough. The boy died at five. Abdulaziz's lament, when they told him, ripped a hole in the early morning sky.

Then bad things happened fast. After the family buried Hamza, a dozen young men from his village showed up in the mission yard. Some brandished knives, and one carried a pirate's pistol. They chanted, they raged, they grabbed Mainard and slapped him around. When he slumped to the ground and covered his groin, Mariam told Amos, “Stay here. Seeing you will make them worse.”

She went out to confront them alone, wielding her courage as though it were one more medical skill she had picked up, like suturing. She helped Mainard to his feet, all the time talking to the attackers. She spoke too quickly for Amos to follow what she said. He had to rely on her tone, which was steady, with no hector in it. And she backed them down, standing in the dusty yard with her arms crossed on her chest watching them all the while they made their prolonged noisy decision to go away. The oldest, a

man of thirty in a green skullcap, pointed to the cross on the ridge beam. He spat in the dirt and said something short and bitter to Dr. Sissoko.

Afterward, watching her stitch a cut in Mainard's arm in the clinic, Amos asked her what the man who pointed to the cross had said.

"He said such an abomination against Allah must be burnt."

"Will they do it?"

She brushed Mainard's face with a damp cloth, patted his shoulder, told him he had suffered no consequential damage before admitting to Amos, "It's possible."

Which left him no choice. He fired up the computer and Skyped Ford in Bamako.

"Well, it's time, Amos," the director said when he heard about the attack on Mainard, the threat to burn the cross. "It is surely time."

Amos nodded. For some reason an image of his grandmother on the back porch came to him. She was aiming a Winchester 30-30 at an angry bear. For the first time he asked himself what she had felt, pulling the trigger. Along with the danger, was there any sympathy for the wounded creature? Along with the fear, was there hate?

"We've got a problem to solve," Ford told him.

"What's that?"

"The carburetor on that old Cessna went bad on me. No surprise. It's too far gone to fix. I had me not one but two spares on a shelf in the storeroom. Went out this morning, and both of the blamed things are gone, not to mention a couple of cases of motor oil. Someone's been pilfering. Of course there is not a carburetor for a Cessna 172 to be had in this city. Located one in Dakar, which I am having shipped in. By the grace of God, it will be here tomorrow."

They agreed it was time to send the staff away. All this had been thought through, drilled, thought through again. Mainard and Georgette would stay back with Amos and the doctor, packing the medications and doing the other jobs that were necessary before they closed the mission. Georgette had family living nearby. They would come escort her and Mainard to safety before Mariam and Amos flew out.

Ford said, “Doc, Amos, be ready. I’ll let you know when I’m heading your way, but be prepared to hop the instant you hear an engine in the sky.”

He wanted to know what to tell Prudence. She had made Amos promise to hold nothing back, and he told Ford to spare her no details. Ford bit his leather lips and nodded.

“You okay, Amos?”

“I’m okay.”

“Dr. Sissoko?”

“Yes. I too am okay.”

“Feel that wind at your back? That’s the breath of Jesus, that’s us praying you safe.”

It took little convincing for the staff to agree to go, but it did take time. They needed to react, to express their reactions, to comment on their neighbors’ reactions. When they were ready, Amos led them in prayer. Georgette and Mainard knew what they were supposed to do and went about it with dispatch. By sundown it was oddly quiet. Going, the staff took the mission chickens with them. When Georgette’s brother and three male cousins showed up, Amos sent the seven goats with the escort party, and he and Mariam were alone.

Georgette had left a meal on the stove. They fixed plates and ate separately, he in the clinic, she in the house she shared with two other women. Amos read First Timothy mechanically. Last week Philip, his oldest grandchild, had fallen out of a tree in the back yard in Binghamton and broken his arm. Amos had never seen that yard, that tree; he had seen little of Philip. The boy was a compendium of anecdotes, a virtual cherub on the computer screen. The distance made Amos feel that he had come up short. The fullness of time, he chided himself, but was not sure what he meant.

Don’t stew, Prudence would have said, but that was exactly what he was doing when Mariam came to the door.

“Abdulaziz is back,” she told him.

“Why?”

She shook her head. She was still in scrubs, as though someone needing an operation might show up. “There is much about this place I do not know. Too much. I lived in England, I lived in Bamako, I vacationed abroad. As a translator, I am full of shortcomings.”

When Abdulaziz began chanting out behind the garden, the sound chilled them. Was he speaking to his God on behalf of Hamza, whose spirit was trapped on alien ground, in the shadow of a hostile cross? Animism, the scholars said, inflected both Islam and Christianity in Mali. Mariam had come into the clinic. Amos took a step toward her. She reached for his hand. The electricity was not static. They pulled quickly away from one another as though this, too, were part of a drill.

“If the carburetor arrives tomorrow morning,” Amos said, “Ford will pick us up in the afternoon.”

She nodded. “Weather permitting.”

“I don’t want to leave, Mariam.”

“You want everything to stay the same.”

Stubbornness, a corollary of pride, forced the words from him. “I want to wake up here every morning for as long as I am strong enough to stay.”

If an individual could have his own heresy, here was his.

Later that night, the sound of men’s voices drove them separately to the clinic. Abdulaziz’s great bass rumble was easily distinguished. There might be four more, there might be half a dozen.

“What does it mean?” Amos asked Mariam.

“I don’t know. At this moment, it seems I do not know what anything means.”

She sobbed once and choked it back. They were in the dark, not wanting to call attention to themselves by lighting a kerosene lantern. They sensed each other. Guilt, blame, horror, recrimination. All of that, or some of it, could come later. They lay on a hospital bed. With blind grace, they stripped. They made love. At a certain point they stopped hearing the voices of the men out beyond the garden.

“Bear,” Mariam said once, but it did not call for an answer.

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In the morning, after the sun rose, they watched the church burn. They were out in the scrub, at a distance from the mission, low to the ground in a middling thicket of eucalyptus trees that gave off a holiday smell. It was going to be a fine day. The lambent

sky was cloudless, but it was way too early to hear the Cessna coming to rescue them. They had a bottle of water and half a roasted chicken. The question on both their minds was whether the men avenging Hamza's death would content themselves with burning the church or go ahead and torch the whole mission.

"How fast it burns," said Mariam.

"After they finish, will they look for us?"

"They have what they wanted."

Amos felt confident that Ford would come for them. If he had to, he would rent another airplane. The cross on the ridge beam was burning now. The arms had a disconcertingly human look, like supplication. He was calm in his consciousness of sin. For the moment, what he wanted was what he had been wanting a long time. Years, probably. It could not be a prayer, but it was his innermost desire. Nothing. Let nothing change.