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Root That Mountain Down

Chapter 1

It's an unspeakable smell. The smell of death. The ripping open of animal to let out the demons, loosing the jumble of organ and bone and tissue and exposing it to open air where microbe and maggot and mosquito can do their work.

Black piles of waste swarming with insects fill clearings in the woods, just beyond the demarcated perimeter where decrepit buildings totter in the heat. Two scraggly roosters barely muster up the energy to chase each other in languid circles amidst food wrappers and beer cans. Muddy men wearing flip-flops cradle tattered playing cards and AK-47s.

A voice booms from inside the long, flat building: "Hey! Hey! Hey!" over and over like a wicked hymn. A shirtless man emerges. Stretching from his right shoulder to his belly button is a long purple scar. The belly button protrudes like a tiny appendage. His arms are outstretched, and unlike the other men, he has a nice potbelly.

He stands with hands on hips, surveying. Slowly, he moves in little circles like an airplane, his arms straight at his sides. He stops, smiles. What's left of his chiseled and cracked teeth is canary yellow, matching the tincture in his eyes. The smile drops from his face as he slowly crouches toward the ground, eyeing, measuring, hunting. One eyebrow sinks low; he squints at his prey.

He picks up a rock and then straightens himself to his full height. He hurls the rock at a man dozing against a tree.

The rock explodes an inch above the man's right ear, chipping the tree trunk. He jumps up and falls into the dirt. He gets up again, grabs his gun and points—at nothing, no one, everyone and everything. He sees like a man coming out of drunkenness; the world sheds its rough corners and sharpens. He sees who has thrown the rock. He lowers the gun. Allows its metal to clang against his kneecap, drawing pearls of blood, and then he runs off behind a building.

“Now we go,” the big man orders, laughing—a low growl of a laugh.

Two rebels with guns obey and push another man along a muddy path. A frayed rope binds his wrists. The twine digs into his wrist, searing the skin with each step and then etching the tissue until the twine stays with tendon. The man hardly registers this pain. It is nothing. It is a pain he knows he will wish for in the days and years to follow. He prefers this be his last day, his last hour, his last minute. The end of this world is a blessing.

They stop at the wide stump of a once mighty tree, pocked now with numerous blade chops and stained a berry purple. The rebels push the handcuffed man down to the ground and then pull him into a kneeling position in front of the stump.

The big man with the purple scar and protruding belly button spits in the wet grass. “Short sleeve or long sleeve?”

The man looks up, sputters, cries, pleads a gurgle of protest.

The big man leans down, kisses the other man tenderly just below his right eye, takes the salt of his tears and tastes it on his lips. He moves those lips to the man's ear and whispers, as if to a crying babe: “Short sleeve or long sleeve?” He places his hand gingerly on the back of the man's head as he asks this.

The tears come faster now, like the slow uncorking of a rusty and underused spigot. He opens his mouth to answer, the future before him an unwinding of terrible consequence. He tries to answer, but vomit fills his mouth, escapes his lips, drops to the log.

The big man grabs his arm, unlooses the chord, and forces his forearm onto the log. “Now!” he roars.

The machete drops, taking the right hand above the wrist in one clean sweep.

The big man grabs his other arm and forces it onto the log. “Go!”

They can hear this order above the man’s screams, dark unceasing howls that rattle the jungle and send the few birds and monkeys yet to have quit this place scurrying off for safer lands.

The machete comes down, but the angle is not precise and the hard bone does its good work of deflection so that the hand is not severed but rather broken, hanging and lifeless. The man stands, sees the dangling hand thumping against his forearm, and he crumples. The others hold him up, forcing him back to the stump. He does not resist, but rather helps by unfolding his legs and coming to rest on his knees. It’s as if there has been some terrible mistake and they all work together now to fix it. All of them precise and concerned. They take the arm and place it against the stump. The hand dangles over and one of the men grabs it and pulls it so that the tendon is stretched taut and clear and clean. The machete comes down and severs it.

Success. The tension gone now. Everyone stands in satisfaction. One of the men grabs the hands and tosses them into a pile. They twirl—the hands—they wave, giving one final salute to the world as they spin through the air, blood trickling from the wrists.

The man knows to hold his arms up, but he’s having trouble. The others remind him, grabbing his arms above the elbow and pointing the fresh stumps to the heavens. The veins have recoiled, snaking back toward the heart, their tension released like ripcords.

“Hold them up,” they remind him. “Hold them up or you will bleed to death.”

He wishes to bleed to death. It is all he wants. And yet he listens to their instructions. He relies upon them. He stumbles down the trail, his arms pointing upward. He approaches the next group: three more men with another being dragged down the trail, arms tied behind his back with

a plastic chord. The soldiers laugh. They joke that “the surgeon” is done with him and is ready for his next patient. When he sees the man without hands come toward them, the man with his hands tied kicks and squeals and screams and fights. The others wrestle with him. But he is strong and he kicks one in the groin and gnashes his teeth until he catches another in the cheek and he butts his woolly head against another until blood pours from his nose, and then the third man takes a snub nosed pistol from his belt and shoots the man in the head so that they all are covered with blood and brain matter and they have to angrily wipe it away and they turn on each other and scream and yell as if doing so will allow them to decide whose fault this all is anyway and why it is they live in a world of jungle and death and things that they long ago decided are just not right and yet because they are so wrong they must have some natural place in the world, a certain rightness more true than all the right in the world combined.

Their argument is a kind of music, a discordant jangle of things limned into the music of the living and the dreams of the newly dead.

* * *

In the capital, Freetown, hundreds of miles away, the rebels walk together like an army. They don't slide on their bellies like their jungle brethren, out in the Kono hinterlands cutting off limbs. They don't hide behind trees. Or behind broken cars, their windshields shattered, wipers dead and useless across the dashboards.

Those who have guns carry them with both hands, palms on the underside of the faux wood, near the banana curve of the clip. The others, most of them, have machetes.

The people are moving away, shielding children, not looking the rebel men in the eyes. Moving away quickly, but not running. Panic, they reason, will only inflame the rebel men, like wild beasts that attack only after they see a person turn and run.

The men continue their march through the streets of Freetown, past Siaka Stevens

Stadium, taking the Main Motor Road toward Aberdeen Bridge, then march north toward White Man's Bay, crisscrossing a series of filthy streams, fetid ravines, sprawling shanties.

They reach the entrance to the Amputees Camp. A satellite dish. A lone palm tree, its fronds stilled in the motionless blister of mid-afternoon. The white and blue sign, "Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme." Under the sign, propped against the left pole, a discarded prosthetic leg. Like a cobbler's model, a wooden substitute for a foot.

Inside the camp, a man on crutches makes his way over a big rutted gash full of dirty water in front of tents covered in plastic sheeting spread out in haphazard rows, each the same dreary off-white interrupted by thin horizontal blue lines. Figures line the dirt pathways. If they have hands, they wave halfheartedly at flies. A group of children, all missing one body part or another—hand, leg, nose, lips—playing a game with stones, throwing or pushing or blowing them into a circle drawn in the dirt.

Inside the tents: A woman bathing a boy in a plastic tub, his right arm gone to the shoulder. A nurse holding the hook of an artificial arm while the owner tries to write with a pencil, but dropping it instead onto the page. He shakes his head when he drops the pencil; hopeless, his head shake says. A girl, a double amputee, on a bed asleep, the ends of her stumps looking like they've been pulled with drawstrings. A teenage boy, the sunlight glistening off his stumps tied off like sausage ends. A man in front of a mirror, moving his one remaining arm up and down, back and forth, a plastic limb sitting behind the glass.

A boy in a tattered white shirt is the first to see the rebels. Frays of white thread from the end of his cut off jeans hang limp in the air above where his right leg used to be. He's been left with only one finger on each of his hands, a perpetual pointing over the rubber handles of his crutches. He just stares at the men with machetes; he has little left to lose.

Some of the nurses see. They run. But one nurse confronts the men. A man with a

machete intercepts her and thrusts his machete into her stomach. He pulls up and then down, a jagged line like the lion's mane of hills outside the city that gives this country its name. When he pulls out his machete, her bowels spill to the ground.

Now everyone runs.

But Francis Laszlo, the white man in Tent No.3, does not run. He does not know what's happening outside the pinstriped sheets of nylon that make up the walls of his new home. But he will know soon. It will be the last thing he will know.

Chapter 2

It looks cold. Soulless blocks of limestone piled one on top of the other in unimaginative squares like a stale wedding cake. Four gigantic columnar teeth protrude from above the entrance, a tumbledown amalgam of squat columns and flat rectangular roofs. As if the building is swallowing her whole as she enters.

Rosemarie Laszlo inhales, sucking in resolve. Enough of the crying. Enough of the hysterics.

She enters the State Department's lobby and piles her belongings into the tray before walking through the metal detector. The police officer looks bored. He doesn't help as she collects her purse and coins and the envelope she's brought with her. She doesn't want to ask him where to go.

She walks the hallway looking for clues. She opens the envelope and pulls out the letter, unfolding its well-worn edges, and reads it again: "We provide guidance to grieving family members on how to make arrangements for local burial or return of the remains to the U.S. The disposition of remains is affected by local laws, customs, and facilities, which are often vastly different from those in the U.S."

She can't stand it. It gets her every time, and she reads it several times a day even though she knows the words by heart.

"'Vastly different from those in the U.S.'," she snorts, pretending to be lost in her own world, hoping someone will hear, sympathize, agree, spout outrages at an unfair world. "Of course they are. Those people are animals."

A woman approaches. "Can I help you ma'am?"

"My husband was murdered in an Amputees Camp in Freetown."

“I’m so sorry . . . Freetown?”

“Sierra Leone.”

The woman nods.

No one ever seems to know, or know for sure.

She nods sympathetically. “You want the Office of American Citizens Services. That’s Room 4817.”

Rosemarie folds the letter again, running a finger along the edge, and puts it back in her purse. Tears well in her eyes, but she blinks them away.

She takes the stairs.

Mr. Hank Peters is the man who will need to assist in this. He is the American consular officer in Freetown, Rosemarie is told.

Is he a sympathetic man, she asks.

Of course, of course, she is told, and is led to another office.

She meets with a State Department officer, who speaks at her: “Jewelry. Apparel. Personal documents and papers. Convertible assets. Mr. Peters will prepare an inventory of the deceased’s effects and we will follow your instructions concerning those effects.” He adds: “I understand the deceased had no identification on his person, that he was identified by a French doctor working in the camp?” He looks on a piece of paper and struggles out the name: *Alexandre Grillet*, though he Anglicizes it, saying, “Alexand-er Grill-it.”

“Is this Grill-it a family member?” he asks.

“Of course not. I have no idea who he is.”

The officer looks at his pen. He taps it against his teeth. “What we need . . . what would make this process much smoother . . . is if next-of-kin identifies the deceased.”

“But the deceased is in Africa.”

“Yes, ma’am. Freetown.”

Rosemarie stares at him blankly. “You’re telling me he can’t come home until I go there and identify him?”

He nods, sympathetically. A difficult job, one a person has trouble getting used to.

“So if I don’t go get the body . . . My husband forever in that horrid African country?”

He nods. Taps his teeth again. “Next-of-kin. You? Perhaps an offspring?”

“They don’t know the man they have,” Rosemarie says.

“I understand. It’s just that, well . . . there have been instances. Occasions. What we don’t want . . . what this office tries to avoid . . . is to have the wrong person . . .”

She stares. She sees in his face his struggle for the right words. She doesn’t care. *Let someone else squirm for once.*

“I understand he was murdered.”

She nods. The tears are coming back. The burn in the throat, the viperous squeeze in the chest.

“That can complicate . . . there are cases sometimes when the deceased, as a consequence of the tragedy . . .”

“The deceased is unidentifiable,” she whispers.

“Sometimes mistakes can be made. We need to be sure,” he says, fixing her with a stare directly into her red-rimmed eyes.

She nods. She’s tired. Very, very tired. She hears the rest, but it hardly registers:

“ . . . this office can help with Letters Testamentary, Letters of Administration, and Affidavits of Next-of-Kin . . . we will be in contact . . . Mr. Peters in Freetown . . . U.S. consular mortuary certificate . . . orderly shipment of remains to facilitate U.S. Customs clearance.”

She nods again, hating this man, hating Hank Peters, hating, most of all, Dr. James Albert.

This is his fault, she thinks. Dr. Albert was supposed to be a friend. But he is the reason her husband went to Sierra Leone. He's the reason, she is sure.

The officer is speaking quickly now, finding refuge in well-worn bureaucratic grooves, “. . . Mr. Peters will ensure that the foreign death certificate, affidavit of the foreign funeral director, and transit permit, together with the consular mortuary certificate, accompany the remains to the United States. But . . .” and this is where Rosemarie hears him again because this is what complicates everything, what will ultimately change her world even more than it already has: “. . . all this first requires a positive identification.”

There is nothing positive about this, she laughs. But it's not a real laugh and he knows it. So he doesn't laugh back, only pauses before he gets back on with it: “As I said, Mr. Peters in Freetown will ensure that the foreign death certificate, affidavit of the foreign funeral director, and transit permit, together with the consular mortuary certificate, accompany the remains to the United States . . .”

And then Rosemarie is out in the overcast day, and little that has transpired over the past forty-eight minutes has registered.

So she makes her way blindly to the restaurant where she's to meet her son.

* * *

When Felix flew back to Baltimore from Paris, his mother wasn't at the airport. She had proposed they meet for lunch in D.C., as she'd been spending all of her time at the State Department. Their first meeting being a public one is designed to be a deliberate guard against potential hysterics.

When he enters the restaurant, she's sitting alone at a small table, her elbows resting on two menus. She stares out the window. Her hair, usually a perfectly coiffed masterpiece of layers and wings, has fallen flat across her forehead. Her eyes sink into a nest of purple wrinkles. She looks as

if she's on the edge of breaking.

Felix walks to the table and kisses her cheek.

"Hello, darling," she says, clutching his elbow.

"You look good," he lies.

She smiles—a sad, unconvincing smile.

"How was Europe?"

"It was good. I took lots of pictures."

She nods. "I'll want to see them. Did you love Paris?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Your father and I—"

"I know. Your honeymoon. You don't have to, Mom."

She takes a tissue to her eyes. "It's this awful weather. So sad," she says.

"It was like this in Paris."

"You think it's sunny in Freetown?"

"Maybe." Felix picks up the menu, scanning. But little registers. His mind flashes to the moment when he got the news. He was in Jausiers at the time, a little ski village in the French Alps near the Italian border. Word came the old-fashioned way—by telegram, via three separate taxis—from Marseille to Gap to Barcelonette to Jausiers. The property manager delivered it.

"*Je regrette, monsieur. Je regrette,*" she said over and over as Felix threw his things into his bag and took the same waiting taxi into a succession of larger towns until he got a train out of Marseille. He called his mother from Orly before he boarded his plane; she wasn't yet grieving, but was instead harried by crazed attempts at sorting through the details. But this much was clear: he had been murdered, shot in the chest at the Doctors Without Borders Amputees Camp in Freetown.

They're silent. Felix has surprised himself with his composure and realizes the intelligence in meeting this way. He'd pretty well sobbed himself dry the past forty-eight hours.

He reaches across the table and places his hand on his mother's. But as soon as he does, she retracts, stiffens up, and takes a deep breath. "They say that his body has to be identified before they send him home."

"What about his passport? He had some ID, I'm sure."

"He was naked . . . the animals stripped him of everything. A woman, too. She was naked also."

His dad was found with a woman and they were naked? Felix searches his mother's face for hints of being betrayed, but there's nothing. Perhaps she's in denial. Or maybe she has thought about it, but one shock is more than enough. The notion that she might have lost her husband twice—once to another woman, and once to those "animals"—is simply too much to bear.

"What about Dr. Albert? Couldn't he identify Dad?"

"He's in the jungle . . . Some friend, huh? Lures your father to Africa and then slips off into the jungle to watch his elephants while your father gets murdered."

"Dad wasn't 'lured'."

"It's rotten, if you ask me. The body sits in Freetown while that man is off taking his photos and dung samples. There's no one else, Felix. Those Africans are hopeless."

There's no gravid pause, no grand moment of consideration, before Felix says: "Why don't I go get him myself?" As if there is no more natural solution in the world.

Her features tighten. Tears hang on the precipice of her swollen lids and then at once fall to the table.

The waiter approaches and asks if they're ready to order. "Ped Pad King," Felix says even though he isn't hungry. "Mom?"

“Just water.”

The waiter takes the menus and walks off.

“No,” she whispers. Then she adds, with strength, “Absolutely not, Felix. I’m not going to lose my son the way I lost my husband.” She puts her hand, palm down, on the table.

“I’ll identify him, and I’ll bring him home. We can bury him like a real human being. I can’t stand him being there, in that place. You can’t either.”

“No, Felix. No.”

“So, what? He’s just going to stay there forever?”

“Those animals don’t know the man they have,” she says. She grabs a napkin from the holder on the middle of the table and pats her eyes.

“Let me get him then.”

“How would you?” she asks. “You don’t even know anyone.”

“I can contact someone in Doctors Without Borders.”

“Those cowards. They let him die. He was one of their own and they let him die.”

“I’m not sure what they could have done.”

“They vacated after the attack. There’s no one.”

The waiter brings two waters and Felix gulps at his while his mother’s sits untouched.

“What about Dr. Albert?” Felix asks.

“He’s a thousand miles away.”

“But maybe he can arrange something. He has to know people.”

Rosemarie looks out the window. She stares for a long time. So long Felix turns around to see what she’s looking at, but sees only a sheath of rain coating the glass. “Do you know that he called the house?” she says finally. “Dr. Albert. He called from Bangui. After the coup attempt last year. The government could no longer guarantee his security. The university was calling him back.

Do you know what that man did?”

Felix shakes his head.

“He stayed anyway. Arranged private security. Some Australian guy. I don’t understand how one man can be such big security.” She heaves a big sigh and picks up her water glass.

“I don’t understand. So? That sounds pretty impressive to me.”

She puts her glass down and stares at Felix as if trying to divine who he is, some sudden stranger masquerading as her son.

“I can’t believe it. You are your father, Felix.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“He reacted the same way. Very impressed. Do you know that he moped around the house for a week, even worse than usual? Then he woke me up in the middle of the night. He was out of his mind. He kept calling himself a coward. There was James, in the jungle, in a country where people were being killed in the capital, but he was out there anyway. ‘And where am I?’ he asked. I said, ‘Baltimore.’ I meant that as a good thing. ‘James Albert is crazy and you’re not.’ But all he said was, ‘Exactly,’ and he went downstairs. I caught him the next morning with that damn atlas. He was making arrangements to go to Africa that very week.”

“It’s what he wanted, Mom.”

“James Albert is no friend of this family’s.”

Felix wants to protest; he’d always admired Dr. Albert. But he knows better. This is not the time to defend the old guy. So the rest of their meeting consists mostly of Felix picking at his food and his mother watching him. Soon, they part, with nothing settled. He kisses her check, promises to call in the morning.

Felix goes home to get some sleep, only to be awakened just after midnight by insistent pounding on his apartment door. It’s his mother. She sweeps her mussed hair from her face. Two

thin blue streaks run from her eyes. Her cheeks are very red, as if she'd been slapped.

“Are you okay?”

“I want you to go,” she says.

They move to the couch and he pushes aside his duffel, still unpacked from Europe. A dozen canisters of film roll out. “I spoke to James,” she says.

“Dr. Albert?”

Despite her deep misgivings, in an extraordinary act of courage—or desperation—she'd reached Dr. Albert that evening and asked him if he'd take her son to Sierra Leone.

“If you're going to Freetown, you're not going to do it alone. You'll go to the Central African Republic first,” she says.

“That's not real close to Freetown.”

“Meet Dr. Albert in Bangui and then the two of you will go to Sierra Leone together. It's the only way. Those idiots at the State Department . . . I need him home, Felix . . .”

And so, home from Europe barely one full day, Felix readies himself for a trip to Bangui, Central African Republic.

Chapter 3

Felix shuffles through the familiar terminals at BWI, the international departure wing once again, takes his place on board, promptly falls asleep, then wakes at JFK before the long haul into Bangui with a one-night layover in Accra.

Despite his fatigue, he's unable to sleep on the voyage across the ocean. His thoughts run interminably to Lizzy. He can't explain the sour taste in his mouth. She's done nothing wrong, of course. It was not her fault that he'd gone to Europe by himself, that he'd allowed their relationship to simply dissolve before he took off, so imbued with a sense of freedom, feeling—erroneously, ridiculously—that the trip would last forever and the real world would remain out of reach somewhere, suspended, condemning only others to its rules and demands and responsibilities. None of this was her fault—not that his father is dead, not that he's by himself heading to Africa. The irony of this, and her absence, is not lost on him.

He'd wanted to go to Africa after college. When he told Lizzy this, she looked at him blankly and asked, "Why Africa?" Hearing her trepidation, he had visions of being stranded in places like Addis Ababa or Dar Es Salaam, waiting for broken down buses and Lizzy sitting silently nearby while he berated himself for getting them into such a mess. So he changed the trip to Europe, a more palatable destination, ostensibly for her. But he did all the planning himself, stopped consulting her. And of course she didn't come. She had a new teaching job to start. So he went alone. And now he'd come back, three months later, been home a day, hadn't called her, and now—leaving again.

And now that he's in Africa, heading by taxi from the airport to his hotel, under the most inauspicious circumstances, he thinks again about her, about what a fool he is. About her justified anger when she learns that he'd been home from Europe, that he hadn't even called her to tell her

about his dad—in the three years Felix and Lizzy had been together, Lizzy and Felix’s father had developed a close relationship—and that he’d taken off again.

What he’d give now to talk to her, to touch her, to hold her. Never so alone in his entire life as this.

He wishes it weren’t so, but this aloneness isn’t entirely to do with just Lizzy. It’s as much to do with fright. He can silently condemn his mother for what he assumes is her lack of imagination, for her view of Africa as nothing more than one enormous killing machine full of savages; he knows the ignorance in this. And yet it’s only a thin barrier that keeps him from falling prey to a similar line of thinking.

Its genesis runs back all the way to elementary school, when his third grade class watched a *National Geographic* film about Ubangi tribesmen, great black men carrying spears and wearing poles through their lips and noses. Most of the kids in the class laughed and spoke in gibberish in imitation. They couldn’t stop cracking up—it was an obvious and easy joke and while their teacher tried to impress them with the culture and history of the Ubangi people, they only laughed more. “Do you Bang-ee?” they asked each other. “You better believe I Bang-ee,” was the rote response, a joke that never got tired. It was different for Felix—the women standing in dignified poses, babies tied to their backs and large, flat plates extending their lower lips—they mesmerized him.

Still, that night in a dream, he saw Ubangi men dancing around fires and shrieking, their fierce white eyes rolling around in their pitch faces. Nearby, Felix peeked through a stand of tall reeds as the men danced around the fire, their pendulous penises swinging like ropes. Then, all at once, they stopped. They turned toward him, their eyes flashing at the blind where he hoped he’d become invisible. He wanted to scream, but no sound. Just the eyes—savage eyes that spotted him, eyes moving within heads that would soon communicate guttural instructions to tie Felix to a spit and roast him over a fire. Then he woke, his heart pounding. Ignorance and boyhood fright had

created that dream. But now, as he is edging ever closer to those people, where these real live human beings actually live, it is no mere nightmare, no silly joke. The sensation titillates him, titillates by terrifying him.

Worse, he has actually been to Africa once before, very recently in fact, and, he is forced to admit to himself, it hadn't gone well. During the Europe trip. In southern Spain, he'd hopped the ferry at Algeciras and sped past Gibraltar to Tangier. As Felix walked to the front desk of his hotel, a tall thin man with dark, bushy hair marched past. He stopped at the arched threshold and turned to Felix.

"I'd get the hell out, mate," he said. "This city is full of beggars and thieves. Fifteen months away from New Zealand, and it's one day in Morocco that I lose all my things. I'd get out now, while you still have your gear." Felix shrugged and walked past him, eager to see the place for himself, to accrue some great stories to bring back to his dad. This was real adventure travel—so much more exciting than tame Europe—and he thrilled in the foreignness, the hint of danger. He knew: his dad would love it.

He headed to the city center, following the narrow streets as they widened near a blue-tiled mosque. Women clutched the ends of their burnouses and shielded their faces. The men, all wearing small, rounded caps, ignored him. Kids in western t-shirts followed, yelling that for a small fee they would be his guide. They each grabbed a hold of his hand and tugged him in different directions until one—he looked to be about sixteen and the oldest among them—pushed the other kids away. He pulled Felix aside and whispered conspiratorially, "I am guide. I take you. You see Paul Bowles' house?"

Felix shook his head.

"The Rolling Stones? Timothy Leary? William Burroughs. Naked Lunch. Heroin?"

"No, thank you," he said and turned to walk away.

“Tune in, man. Turn on.” He smiled and held out his hands. “Drop out, my fren.”

It was getting dark and the merchants were packing up, so Felix grabbed two skewers of grilled chicken and some oranges and made for his hotel. But he soon realized that he’d turned down the wrong street. He thought he recognized a bank, so he turned down the street where it sat at the corner, but that wasn’t right either. It was almost completely dark.

Felix tried a few more streets and wound up in an alley that ended at a sandstone wall. When he turned around, he saw the figure of a man outlined by a faint stretch of lamplight. Felix walked over to him. The man didn’t move. “Hello?” Felix said. He mumbled something. Felix came closer. The shadows moved across the man’s face, covering his forehead and eyes. Felix could see half his face clearly now, his little chin bobbing up and down as if he was gumming a meal. Gray and black whiskers stood erect on his jaw. Felix came closer and the light shifted to reveal two dead eyes—cold, blue, and sightless—scanning back and forth.

Felix took off, running full speed down every deserted street, searching desperately for the yellow arch of his hotel. A solitary cat prowled by, but it fled at Felix’s approach. Disembodied voices floated out of a thousand television sets, chasing him through the city, its sagging roofs sporting a multitude of satellite dishes.

Finally, he reached the hotel. He’d run past it several times; darkness had turned the yellow arch into the color of a bruise. He retreated to his room and locked the door. Sweat raced in rivulets down his face. He sat in the darkness for a long time, waiting for his heart to resume a normal pace before he went to the window to let in some air, hoping to chase away the oppressive heat. He pulled back the flimsy white shade and saw a man there, staring at him. The man’s hands rested inside the pockets of his jeans; a crumpled cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth below a thick black mustache.

Felix and the man stared at each other. The only movement between them the slow escape

of a stream of gray smoke from the man's nostrils. Felix grabbed the stick that had been left in the windowsill and wedged it between the jamb and the top of the window. Then he let the shade drop and felt his way through the dark toward his pack. Rifling through the front pocket, he pulled out his Swiss Army knife. He sat with his back against the wall, the knife opened to its largest blade and resting on his palm.

He drifted in and out of sleep throughout the night, waking to a dim idea that the man in the courtyard was trying to kill him, that it was his dark eye that was the object in the crack of space between the shade and the windowsill. Then, scratching at the doorknob. Felix watched in the darkness as the knob revolved slight quarter turns, opening his eyes as widely as possible and then squinting as hard as he could, trying to decide if what he was seeing was real or some trick of the shadows.

Slowly, on tiptoes, Felix moved to the door and bent to the keyhole. He pressed his eye there and saw only darkness. He stared for a long time until he saw two clearly discernible rows of eyelashes closing. He could see everything—the way the lashes clasped one another in a perfect embrace, the slow lifting to reveal a black pupil.

Felix sprang from the door and onto the bed. Holding the knife straight up in front of him, he sat up the rest of the night until dawn announced itself in shades of pink through the sash. He looked outside—there was no man waiting to kill him, no phantoms, no apparitions regarding him with blind and evil intent. Had the entire thing simply been his overheated imagination?

Whatever it was, Felix was sufficiently spooked. He grabbed his bag and headed to the lobby where, on his way out, he passed the Kiwi describing to a bored policeman what it was that had been stolen. By mid-morning, he was on the return ferry to Spain.

Embarrassed, he wouldn't tell his father that he'd gone to Africa and then promptly turned around.

