

Susan Minot

Pole, Pole

GOODNESS, SHE said. That was something.
You're something.

With you I am. She added under her breath, apparently.

She looked across the room of the cottage to heavy curtains, which blocked out the daylight.

That sliver of light, she said, it's totally white. You can't see the trees or grass or anything. It must be late.

The African noon, he said.

It's blinding.

Too bright to go out in. You better stay right here.

Here? she said. I don't even know where I am.

The night had ended late. It had started way back there at the engagement party she'd gone to with Bragg. Bragg was the ex-fiancé of a friend of hers in London and the bureau chief in Nairobi, who'd taken her under his wing when she'd arrived in Kenya a couple of weeks before. He seemed to know everyone in the crowd at the Muthaiga Club, which spread out into a

lantern-lit interior garden. At one point he called to a tall man who walked toward them, looking at her. Here was one of his boys, Bragg had said, fresh in from Mogadishu tonight and Bragg had winked, leaving her to chat with the man. Then it was Bragg who corralled them both afterward to dinner at the restaurant in Langata. The restaurant was called the Carnivore and waiters sliced long strips of meat from spits set on carts which were wheeled from table to table so you could choose zebra, antelope, buffalo, ostrich. The side walls of the restaurant were low and open to the black night. A thatched roof towered above. She and the man sat beside each other at the long table, but chatted with everyone else, shouting above the noise. At the end of the meal the man turned to her, smiling with a presumptuous look.

Connected to the eating area by a concrete ramp was a throbbing dance floor with another bar and tables and chairs. After dinner the group flowed down the ramp and disappeared into the jumbling crowd and danced and drank more beer. They both danced till the crowd began to thin out.

In an unlit parking lot Bragg was sorting out rides. Some people were going back to somebody's house, and there was the usual indecision and stumbling and pulling of sleeves and keys stabbing at dark ignitions. She told the man she really did need to call it a night even though she wasn't working the next day and he replied he had a car. Coming out of the restaurant's driveway to the main road, the red taillights of the other cars turned to the left, floating one after another in the darkness. He and she, in a partly open Jeep, turned to the right.

There were no other cars on the road, so the only light was the dim topaz bar cast by the headlights of his rattletrap Jeep. Sometimes the road was paved, with enormous black craters bitten out of it, then it would revert to a rusty dirt, polished hard with a deep rut, like a road beside a farmer's field.

As the Jeep rounded a bend it lurched off the road. She thought

he had lost control. Then he applied the brake and she saw they were in a pull-over. She looked at the man, whose face was solemn, staring ahead.

What is it? she said.

He said he needed to kiss her. He said it still looking through where the windshield was detached from the hood to the darkness beyond the headlights.

The direct statement stopped her. A direct statement often had that effect. She sat there, powerless. It was a welcome feeling. She felt the outline of herself begin to dissolve.

When they pulled back onto the road, the Jeep made a sharp U-turn and headed back toward his place.

She rode in the passenger seat on the left side, not the right. Many things here were like that. These were the sort of moments she waited for, being whisked away in the dark. It wasn't something you could do on your own. So much of what she did was on her own. Though that had its advantages, too. On your own you could pick up and leave. You could visit new lives and try them on for a while. What else was life for but to check it out?

She rode with a hand on the roll bar, taking the bumps as if riding waves. His kiss had both woken her up and made her sleepy. A warm air blew around them in the dark.

They turned onto a smaller road and drove till they came to a driveway. The Jeep stopped in front of a metal gate. A figure rose up out of the darkness. A face turned toward the headlights, squinting with an offended expression. He was one of many Masai warriors who'd left nomadic life on the savannahs to find work as *askari*, guarding houses in Nairobi's suburbs. This *askari* wore a gigantic overcoat, his black and red *shuka* showing below the hem. He lifted his spear in greeting, ducking away from the light, and went to unwind a heavy chain from the gate post. He walked the swinging gate out toward the car and stood beside it as the Jeep drove in.

Does he stay there all night? she said.

The man shrugged. He'll go back to sleep.

They drove up a short hill, rocking side to side, then stopped in a turnaround in front of a cottage. Paned French doors reflected the light back at them. Off to the right she could see the pale shape of a low building with one small window and a door. When the headlights went off everything was black. She saw nothing as he led her to the door and then inside.

Now they lay in bed with the curtains closed and the noon light slashing a blade of light across the floor. From the front room, the other room in the cottage, came the sound of something like a couch being scraped across the concrete floor.

What's that? She looked alarmed.

Nothing, he said. Just Edmond. Who?

My man. The extent of my staff.

That's what you call him, your man?

No, I call him Edmond. Edmond takes very good care of me. He has done for a long time. He lives in that little place next door with one of his wives.

How many wives does he have?

Three, poor sod.

In the other room a radio went on, very loud, then immediately switched off.

He's in there tidying up. It's okay.

Okay, she said.

After a while she said, Doesn't anyone around here have to work? Besides Edmond.

No.

Don't we have to get to work?

Sure, he said. Let's go to work.

Really.

No, really. I'm ready. His arms wrapped around her.

I thought you said you had a story to file.

It would give Bragg a heart attack if I handed a story in on time. The man spoke with a Kenyan accent, We are not in a hurry hee-ah.

Then he said, What are you doing to me?

She gave a small laugh, unconvinced.

You're dangerous, he said.

Okay. I was wondering if you were sincere. Now I know. You're not.

From the front room a door banged shut, rattling panes.

You're brave to be here, he said.

How's that?

Usually I scare them off.

She looked at his profile. It was not unusual for a man in his late thirties to have an unlined face, but the man's skin was unusually smooth and fair. It was not a face that would scare off a woman.

Them? she said. She looked past him to the curtains. They were thick and white but looked dark in the shadows. She sat up a little.

Hey, she said, something just went by. She narrowed her eyes. A red streak.

Where?

She pointed to the window. In that sliver of light.

He lifted his head off the pillow, looked concerned for a moment, then laid it back down. Who knows, he said.

Doesn't worry you?

Can't.

You don't get worried about the attacks?

Oh, them. We've always had the attacks. They're just more newsworthy to the world at large at the moment. It's nothing new for us. He closed his eyes. If you let yourself worry here you'll go mad.

I thought everyone here was mad.

He opened one eye, interested. So she had been listening to what he'd said the night before. He peered back toward the sliver of light. Could be anyone out there. Edmond's got nine children. At last count.

Yikes. They're not all next door, are they?

No, but Cecily lets them visit. Which not all wives do. Cecily rules the roost. She also does my clothes washing.

Your staff is expanding.

He held his fist to her chin.

Where do the other wives live?

In Kibera.

People here are spoiled, she said.

Not in Kibera.

She gave him a withering look. The whites, I mean.

Did you know Kibera is one of the largest slums in the world? That's something to make us Kenyans proud.

She looked past him into the shadowy room. There was a kilim-covered hassock near a small table with an old brown dial phone on it. Clothes were gathered in small piles at the edge of the room and newspapers and books rose in loose stacks against the wall. Hanging in the doorway instead of a door was a faded purple and yellow *kikoi* with dangling tassels. On the wall beside it was a large black-and-white photograph of a Masai warrior leaping a few feet into the air above blowing dust. A heavy iron hat stand made by a local artist whose ironwork she'd noticed in other Nairobi houses held a dirt-spattered oilcloth, a few safari hats with curled brims, and balanced on top, a *ringu*, a carved wooden club with its persimmon-shaped knob. She looked at the room, but she was thinking of the Kibera slum. She'd been filming the children there at an orphanage. Most of her work before had been in nature documentaries; she'd not seen this sort of poverty up close. At first the children she was filming had watched her with an expectant stare as if she were about to burst into flame. Then gradually they became animated till they were swirling around her like

a school of fish, showing the most perplexingly joyful smiles. These children had lost their parents and were living in a place made up of a jumble of lean-tos the size of armchairs and she couldn't get over how much they were smiling. The camera around her neck cost more than most of them would see in a lifetime. Most of these children had a deadly disease. She told herself, I am here to help, a weak plea of self-justification. She had an even more uneasy feeling she admitted to no one, that in some way she was worse off.

We are spoiled, said the man with his hands crossed behind his head. But there's justice. We're also miserable wrecks. What are you looking at?

You.

The man's face may have been smooth, but his eyes did not look spoiled. They looked worn out.

She turned on her back and faced the ceiling. It was painted dark blue and where it met the stucco walls you could see the undulating line of the human hand. The plaster had been smoothed by hand, too, making a soft, uneven surface.

So what are you doing here? he said.

She glanced at him to see if he meant something more. His face was placid.

The documentary, you know—

He shook his head. I mean, really. Here, on the other side of the world.

I always wanted to come here.

His eyebrows rose.

You mean, what am I running away from? She went on in a flat tone. Nothing. Getting as far away as possible from Darien, Connecticut?

Is that where you're from?

Was.

Not anymore?

It's not a place I ever really related to.

So you've come to Africa to relate?

Oh no, she said. You're not going to be one of those people. What people?

Who give you a hard time for being in Africa.

He shrugged. I just don't have a lot of patience for the thrill-seeking tourist.

She said nothing. She thought of Babette, the German woman who ran the orphanage they were filming. Babette was not a thrill-seeker. She was a good human being as far as one could tell, stern one moment, loving the next. She had a purposeful manner. The first day filming she had taken one look at Babette with her steady eyes and strong jaw and thought, Now there's the sort of person I'll never be.

After a while he said, I'm glad you're in Africa.

Can I ask you something?

Anything. He sounded relieved.

You don't happen to have . . . her voice trailed off and she sort of laughed . . . a girlfriend or a wife, do you?

Well yes, he said in the same gentle tone. I do.

You do?

Yes, I thought you knew.

Her body went still. They were both facing the ceiling and neither turned.

I thought Bragg would have told you, he said.

She shook her head. They were silent.

Which? she said.

Which what? He too seemed surprised.

Wife or girlfriend?

Wife.

They were silent again.

Children? she whispered.

Uh-huh. He cleared his throat. Two. Girls.

She turned on her side, propping herself up on an elbow. She thumped him on the chest. It hit harder than she meant it to.

Ow, he said.

Sorry. She flopped onto her stomach and smushed her face into a pillow. She reached back for the tangled sheet and pulled it up over her backside. The sheets were sort of olive brown, typical bachelor sheets, she'd thought.

That's okay, he said.

I'm an idiot, she said into the olive-brown pillow.

No you're not.

I thought you lived here. One finger tapped the olive-brown sheets near her head while the rest of her remained frozen.

I do. When I'm working in Nairobi.

She peeked out of one eye. How old are they?

Fiona's six and Emma's three.

Jesus. She sat up, holding the sheet around her. I didn't ask, she murmured. She looked at him. He looked back. Okay, so I didn't ask.

Where are you going?

Getting up. She dragged the sheet with her and stood on the thin rug. She scanned the dim floor for her clothes.

I thought you knew, he said again.

It looked like such a bachelor pad, she said under her breath. She located her bra and wisp of a shirt. I thought . . . I mean, I wasn't even . . . I mean, whatever. I didn't want to think. She found her skirt crumpled under the bed.

Are you upset? he said.

She was putting on her clothes and stopped for a moment. I don't know, she said. Then she started moving again.

He got up. He put on new clothes, different from the ones he'd worn last night. He buttoned a light blue shirt, looking at each button. He went to the window and pulled back one of the curtains. More light came into the room.

Where are they?

He looked over, worried.

Your family.

In Naivasha, at the lake. His voice was still gentle but the honey had gone out of it. We have a house there.

Oh, they're out there, she said. She sounded as if she were daydreaming.

My wife grows flowers.

She looked at him, frowning.

No, he said, a farm. It's our business, a flower farm.

Oh. She found her sandals. That sounds nice.

He kept looking out the window. My wife's really the one who runs it.

Uh-huh. She sat on the kilim-covered hassock and began strapping on her sandals. They were well-traveled sandals with a worn-down heel.

He looked back at her. We're apart a lot, he said.

She regarded him from lowered brows.

Will I see you again? he said, watching her from the window.

Her hands were occupied buckling her sandals. She didn't roll her eyes when she looked at him, but the expression was the same. No?

She rethreaded her sandal straps, first making them tighter, then making them looser. What for?

I don't know about you, he said. But that doesn't happen all the time. He pointed to the bed.

Oh, I think actually it does. She laughed.

He stepped toward her and stood there with his bare feet and light blue shirttails untrucked. You said so yourself it was something.

She released her sandal and set her feet on the floor. Her mouth made a small puffy sound. I don't know, she said, and seemed to deflate. Her shoulders slumped.

I do, he said. He sat down beside her on the hassock. He slumped, too, but his shoulders still were above her head.

It was great, he whispered. He sounded sure.

For you, she shot back, but her heart wasn't in it. Inside she felt a flutter of panic.

He was sitting close to her and she would only have had to move her head a few inches to slump a little further against him. But she didn't. She remained in the freeze position.

Filming the wild dogs of the Kalahari Desert she'd learned about the three strategies for survival: flight, fight, or freeze.

I'm not going to say I don't love her.

God no, she murmured. And then, Sorry.

She felt how near he was. She thought, I'll just stay here one more minute then I'll stand up and smile and walk out. He'd accept that. Standing up, she could still keep a small amount of her dignity intact, maybe. She would pick up her handbag and go into the front room, find her cigarettes on the driftwood tree-stump table, get a drink of water in the bare kitchenette, and wait for him to follow with the car keys. They would get back in the Jeep and he'd drive her to the guesthouse in Karen where she was staying and where she'd stay another two weeks till they finished shooting. Then she'd check out about doing that story about the cattle vaccinations in the Sudan and go there, or would find another story to do or another project somewhere or anything as long as it was somewhere else and Nairobi was not in it.

Daisy, he said.

What? she said, impatient.

Daisy.

She wished he wouldn't do that, say her name that way. She glanced up and made the mistake of looking into his face. Oh God, she thought, or didn't think. His face was full of concern. She found herself believing it. Just for a second, she said to herself, and down her head came and collapsed on his chest.

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The night before it had seemed as if she were sailing toward something warm and enveloping. Now she was being swept in a different direction. At least she was being moved, she reasoned, one way or another.

OK, though, now was the moment to stand up.

She didn't move and the moment passed. Another moment passed. She was still not standing.

Lulled by the heartbeat in her ear, she wondered, was this the moment she would look back on and think, I could have walked away, but didn't?

In the quiet they both heard something crack like two rocks hitting. It came from in front of the cottage.

Now what? he said. His head tipped forward. They heard shouts. Christ, he said. He sprang up, though his face was not alarmed. He headed for the doorway, pulled aside the purple and yellow *kikoi*, and disappeared. The soles of his feet were the last thing she saw.

She heard him rattle open the front door and yell out something in Swahili. The voice grew faint when he stepped outside and moved away from the house.

She sat on the hassock. After a while she heard people's voices coming back into the cottage. She heard the man. A voice answered in native accents. She got up and ducked past the *kikoi* into a small hallway. She peeked out from the door frame into the front room.

The man's back was to her, his hands shoved in his front pockets. A thin man stood in front of him, gesturing as he talked. He had a dark, shaved head and was wearing a cream-colored shirt with short sleeves and four pockets. That would be Edmond. He was about the same age as the man. Next to him were two boys, not quite teenagers, looking caught. The taller one wore a large red T-shirt, which came almost to his knees. He didn't look at

Edmond or at the man. The younger one had a dark T-shirt which said VOTE THE MIAMI WAX. He also faced the floor, but was watching Edmond out of the corner of his eye.

As Edmond talked, the man was nodding. He shook his head, listening. He ran his hand over his hair. At one point he lifted his arms, as if to say, Now what? Wait, Daisy thought, What had she been thinking of just now? She'd lost the thread of something . . . oh, that's right, a wife. There was a wife. She looked at the man's back. He looked different to her now.

Edmond cleared his throat. He looked away for a moment, as if not wanting to get to this part of the story, and he saw Daisy hiding by the door. Smoothly his gaze slid by her, betraying nothing of what he'd seen.

The man's hands were clasped on top of his head. Edmond looked once at the boys, then looked at no one and finished what he had to say.

Everyone stood there, silent.

The man dropped his arms. He turned a stony profile to the boys. The younger one was rolling his shirt around his fist. The man spoke to the older one in the red T-shirt, asking him a question. The boy raised his eyes, blinked slowly, and spoke. His tone of voice was defiant.

The man snapped. His screaming startled Daisy in her little hall. The boy did not look startled. He listened, unimpressed. When the man finished yelling, the boy spat on the floor near the man's feet.

Daisy watched the man's long arm swing back and come forward and smack the small face on one cheek, then with the back of his hand hit the other. The boy's head jerked a little with each blow. His feet didn't move. Edmond and the smaller boy didn't move either. After a moment the boy in the red T-shirt raised his hand to cover his cheek. Daisy thought she saw a smile hidden by his fingers.

The man turned abruptly. He made a gesture that said, This is nonsense and I'm not going to bother myself further. Then he wheeled back toward Edmond. He pointed out to the turn-around, giving him some last orders. Edmond nodded, though Daisy could see his attention was already being pulled toward the boys, though it was unclear whether he wished to check if they were okay, or to continue the punishment. Daisy ducked away from the door before the man saw her.

Her heart was pounding. She went over to the window and the parted curtain. She looked out at the backyard. The brittle grass was covered with a film of dust and at the edge of the lawn were olive bushes and thorny dwarf trees and floppy banana leaves. Half hidden by the brush was a high chain-link fence with loops of new silver barbed wire on top. Beyond the fence was a brown forest floor with spindly tree trunks and discarded, huge maroon leaves.

The man came back into the room, shaking his head with tiny shakes. Sorry about that, he said.

Daisy was looking out the window. He stood close behind her and parted the curtains wider and they both looked out.

What was that all about? she said. I heard you shouting.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. She felt his breath in the hair on the top of her head. He put his arms loosely around her. Just the usual, he said. It's not worth going into.

She thought of the slap and shivered. Maybe he really thought so. Maybe that wasn't a lie. His arms tightened around her.

But you're still here, he said. I'm glad.

I should be going. . . . Her voice trailed off.

She kept staring out at the garden. Nothing was moving in the bleached yard. She was mesmerized, trying not to think of what was behind her. She thought of the boy in the red T-shirt and his strange smile. She stared out to the garden, feeling as if *she* had been slapped. It felt eerie, as if she were right where she belonged.

I saw you hit that boy, she said.

The man spoke in the same full-bodied voice. He had it coming to him, he said.

That's a little harsh, isn't it?

You have to be from here to understand.

People say that a lot.

Maybe because it's true.

She heard his attention straying and turned her head. He was looking toward the other end of the lawn where a woman was hanging laundry.

Come, he said. He unlocked the lock on the tall windows. Meet Cecily.

The air was thick and warm. Daisy followed him outside as if she were in a net, still in the physical lure of him.

The woman at the clothesline wore a crimson short-sleeved dress and a green scarf knotted around her head. She was not tall and when she reached to drape the clothes over a thin rope clothesline, her orange heels lifted out of flip-flops that were thin as pancakes. Her figure was sturdy, her neck and arms thin. The man called to her.

Hello, Mistah T, she said, not turning. She clipped on clothespins made of pink plastic.

Cecily, I'd like you to meet my friend Daisy.

Karibu, Cecily said, and paused for a moment to tip her wrapped head in Daisy's direction. Then she bent down for more clothes.

Asante sana, Daisy said. This about exhausted her Swahili. Welcome. Thank you much.

Daisy's from America, the man said.

Cecily nodded. She snapped open a towel, not looking up.

Since she'd been in Kenya, Daisy had noticed that she was either being stared at as a curiosity or else pointedly ignored. Only occasionally she'd receive a look of hatred from a stranger.

The man walked over to the other side of the woven yellow plastic basket and spoke to Cecily in Swahili. Being in a place where she didn't know the language, Daisy had learned to watch people instead. Often that told her more.

Now Cecily was paying attention to the man. She stared at the towel in her hand, then flung it absently up on the line. She folded her smooth arms, took a big breath, and tucked in her chin. She looked at the man as if sizing him up. For a moment Daisy thought she was going to upbraid the man, and it filled her with an odd sort of hope.

The man mimed how he had hit the boy. Cecily nodded slowly. Yes, yes she knew. The man shrugged and winced. Cecily shook her head in agreement. She pursed her lips. Before speaking she frowned and when she finally did say something it was decisive. Daisy was transfixed. Cecily was giving the man a piece of her mind.

Then suddenly Cecily's face burst into a smile. She let her arms drop and slapped at the man's shoulder. They both laughed. Cecily kept shaking her head and the man was nodding and they laughed together at her joke. Daisy backed away from them, feeling suddenly transparent like a flame in sunlight.

She stood waiting in the driveway next to the Jeep. Through the front window of the cottage she could see the man on the telephone with his back to her, facing the wall. Talking to the wife, she figured. It was bright outside and she was without sunglasses. She strolled off to be out of sight of the man, scuffing the ground. Lots of footprints had distressed the dirt. Suddenly she felt exhausted. For a moment she was back in bed with the man. He was holding her wrist. Sex was like that, not all of you came back right away. Part of you lingered a little longer with the person though eventually that part would return.

She had come near Edmond's house. The one door was open to a turquoise-painted wall. There were only sprigs of grass in the

front yard and a small circle of charred wood. Against the ocher wash of the house sat two white molded plastic chairs. A small child stood in the doorway. She was wearing a pink sleeveless dress with ruffles at the shoulders and eating a papaya. She eyed Daisy. Daisy smiled and said, *Habari*. The little girl's eyes widened and she turned back to the house for instruction, then she looked back at Daisy, saying nothing.

Cecily appeared from behind the little girl, shooing her out the door. Her arms were straining under the weight of a large gray tub. The little girl sat on a log near the burned area biting the papaya, staring at Daisy. Cecily hauled the tub to the end of the yard near some scarlet hibiscus flowers and tossed the water out. It floated in the air like a mirror then came down flat and disappeared in the dirt.

Cecily turned around and saw the white woman standing on the tan drive in her tan skirt. Daisy waved and smiled and started to step back. She rocked on her sandals. Cecily came forward a few steps and stopped. Her smooth solid face was not smiling. At first Daisy thought she was getting some version of the cold stare, the look of disapproval a girl might get stumbling out of the man's cottage, another aimless white girl. But when Cecily lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the sun, Daisy saw a different expression, and it took her breath away. She was looking at Daisy with pity.

The man locked the front door. Everyone here was always jangling keys. When she got into the Jeep she noticed a spiderweb of cracked glass on the center of the windshield. She hadn't seen it the night before, but then it had been dark and she wasn't looking.

The man got in the driver's seat. He turned the key a few times before the engine started. Where to? he said, and pulled at the steering wheel with an effort.

She didn't answer. It wasn't really a question. Back where I belong, she thought. The Jeep bounced forward. They drove out

the gate, which was wide open now in the daytime. Now she saw the road they'd come on. It looked as if it had been heaped with fresh dirt and raked.

Everything okay? he said.

Fine. She didn't look at him. She wanted to start right then not looking at him. The sooner the better. Immediately she felt expanded. She thought, And I don't even need to tell him. She couldn't remember the last time she'd actually felt that way, not needing to explain herself—to him, to anyone.

The feeling was so rare she tried to think where it had come from and Cecily's face appeared.

There was a phrase Daisy had heard a number of times in Kenya: *pole, pole*, pronounced with an accent. It had a number of related meanings. It could mean, Careful now, one step at a time or, Gently does it. It could also mean Sorry and Too bad.

It was the thing people said to comfort someone with a little hardship. You'd say it to a child who'd scraped his knee or to someone whose car had broken down. *Pole, pole*. Poor you, it means. Shame. That had been Cecily's expression: *pole, pole*. You poor thing. It was the understanding expression a mother might have, though Daisy couldn't remember ever having seen it on her own mother's face. Cecily had emphasized the look by nodding, as if to say, Don't forget this conversation we've had. Poor you. Shame. Step by step. Gentle now. How that could all be in a look, Daisy didn't know, but there it was.

When things like that came your way, you should take them. Bouncing along in the Jeep, Daisy thought if she could keep that face in mind she'd be all right. It was nearly like praying to concentrate on it. The light coming through the trees threw barred shadows over the road. She was riding through stripes.