THE INSTITUTE: A WORK OF FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

MISHAEL LAZZARA. The Institute: A Work of Fiction. (Under the direction of DR. AARON GWYN)

A historical fiction novel set in colonial Belgian Congo during World War II, *The Institute: A Work of Fiction* centers around Mary Elkhorn, an American agriculturist who travels to a farming institute located on the Congo River. En route, Mary is recruited by American Foreign Services to work as a "cutout," an American spy, in order to keep tabs on the Belgian civilians who run the institute. Mystery surrounding a mysterious soft ore hangs over the entire colony, where the world's most potent uranium is mined. Her role as unwitting American spy forces her to ask questions and look below the surface of life in colonial Africa. While Mary believes her career aspirations can be reached by undertaking this migration, she will quickly discover that cultural limitations follow her to Africa. Beyond her personal struggles for autonomy in an androcentric generation, Mary is forced to reckon with witnessing human rights' violations and forced imperialism in one of the most turbulent eras in recent history.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

My initial goal for this project was simple--to tell a fascinating story. One thing that I discovered while writing this work of historical fiction was that working within the confines of history offered me a certain definitive timeline, a *relative* plotline, because in a sense the story is already finished. World War II ended--readers know the ending of that particular aspect of the story. A relatively small amount of online research about the role of the Belgian Congo in World War II sparked a fire within me--the story was all right there, right in front of me. However, in order to tell it well--to fascinate readers--I needed to do more research. While a small amount of information might have provided a general outline of the role of the Belgian Congo during WWII, that would not be enough to immerse readers in settings that existed long before I was born and create imaginative characters who thrived, suffered, lived and died within them. This critical introduction will explore the processes and research that went into both setting and character building in order to write this novel.

Initially, the idea for this story came from an Anthony Bourdain (2013) "Parts Unknown" episode that took place in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Bourdain and his team traveled to the actual Belgian institute, the one my story is largely based on, through a series of plane, train and boat rides. Even by today's standards, the trip was not easily navigable. An air of mystery hung around the now-defunct and decrepit institute, which was rumored to be where scientists tested uranium enrichment on human subjects. While I quickly found that no evidence existed to prove that, my interest was piqued.

But what could I write about a place like that--a presently abandoned, post-colonial farming outpost in the middle of the DRC--a country currently rife with civil war and humanitarian crises? I knew I had to go back in time to when the institute teemed with life and purpose--as *misguided* as the purpose of any colonial enterprise might be. I want to point out that this misguidance is more than just a *caveat*, but instead a theme of the novel.

My initial drafts brought my protagonist, Mary, to the Belgian Congo directly after World War II. I wrote this temporal setting simply because in my first semester-long workshop with Dr. Gwyn, I didn't have the time to fully research the timeline and ethos of WWII deeply enough to insert my characters there. Though that period would have initially offered a greater amount of tension and drama, I simply didn't have the confidence or wherewithal to write a WWII historical fiction. However, the connection was made in those early drafts between Mary's history with farming and the institute's actual work with soybean hybrids. Other early research was done on the fly, which confirmed that the uranium for the Manhattan Project was mined in the Belgian Congo--a fact that would change the shape of my story. Yet, what would the impact be if Mary discovered that uranium from the atom bombs came from Belgian Congo *after* the bombs had already been dropped on Japan, after the Congolese men, women and children were disfigured and generations were sickened from forced labor in the mine, after the ore had already been smuggled to Soviet, and possibly even Nazi, scientists? In many ways, Mary was entering the Belgian Congo after the most dramatic moments of that story had already happened.

It was in my *third* workshop course with Dr. Gwyn when he plainly said, "You need her to be there during the war. That's where [and when] the story is."

The only way I could do that was through research--copious amounts of research. This research fell into two different categories, time and place. In order to write this story, I needed to *see* the streets my characters would walk, *read* newspaper headlines they would read.

I was most intrigued when those two categories, time and place, were not mutually exclusive. Susan Williams' (2016) *Spies in the Congo*, a non-fiction exploration of American and British secret service efforts in Africa during WWII, was incredibly useful in allowing me to build the conflict surrounding Mary's role of American spy at the institute. Williams explains how the American government used "cutouts," civilians working undercover in their "regular" jobs while providing information to Foreign Service Offices abroad (Williams, 2016, p. 51). While many cutouts watched for diamond and rubber smuggling, information concerning "soft ores" and Belgian Congo's uranium mine was of *utmost* importance--yet the purpose of uranium was kept as secret as possible, and as a rule, the use of the word itself was avoided completely.

Up to this point in my novel, the word "uranium" is only mentioned once; I do this for a few reasons. The first is to build some level of suspense in readers' minds, but the other reason is because it doesn't *really* need to be explained to modern day readers. I expect most readers to understand the implications of uranium and its connection to WWII. In that sense, I wanted to delay the explicit mention of the word while simultaneously building suspense around it.

While *Spies in the Congo* offered a direct connection to both my temporal and spatial settings, most of the research I gathered was more disparate, in that I had to stitch together story elements in meaningful ways. One example of this is Ken Burns' (2007) four-part documentary series *The War*. While I was able to garner a lot of insight into the

timeline of the war from an American perspective, the documentary offered little to no mention of the war in Sub-Saharan Africa. Still, details about the timeline of the war proved incredibly useful in building the calendar of the novel. For example, before doing this research, I had relatively no understanding of the South Pacific theatre and how that area was a focus very early in the war. This knowledge allowed me to insert the detail of how Mary's neighbor, Michael Halverson, had enlisted and perished by the time she was traveling to Africa in spring of 1943. From overall organization of the plotline to small details, I incorporated the research to provide a deeper context to my story.

One important plot element that I needed help with was how to move Mary from rural Iowa to the Belgian Congo through WWII warzones. While I found possible routes in some of my research, I wanted to be careful with this plot element simply because there are so many experts out there who can find holes in poor research. A fear of mine (that has *not* diminished) is that any historians reading the novel would be removed from the pace of the story due to an unrealistic setting. For this reason, I reached out to the UNCC history department's graduate advisor, Dr. Peter Thorsheim. He sent me further resources that confirmed a route that Williams (2016) had mentioned in her work.

In the novel, Mary and Daniel Miller have to take a Boeing Clipper, a massive boat plane, across the Atlantic. While it was possible that one of those routes could have headed to the Congo from Natal, Brazil, that route was rarer than a trip to Northern Africa where Operation Torch had recently been a success for Allied Forces.

That detour to Dakar helped shape the story and add the plausibility of Mary's role as a *somewhat flippant* American spy. This is a conflict that I will continue to write into the story as her life at the institute unfolds. The trip to Dakar brought with it a whole new element of visual research, which included gathering as many images as possible of

Senegal's coastline during the war. It was important to me to be able to give readers an image of the Clipper landing in the harbor, as well as the streets Mary and Daniel walk with the mysterious secret agent.

From Dakar, Mary finally reaches her destination of Yangambi. Describing Mary's initial impressions of the Belgian Congo was integral to me. I knew I needed both large and small details to give the novel a level of credibility. Beyond just googling images and *staring* at specific photos for moments on end, Bourdain's (2011) "Parts Unknown" episode helped in order to visualize the actual institute, as well as other sensory details, such as the sun setting over the Congo River, the flow of the current, and the exact color of the mud, for example.

Another documentary, *Pygmies: The Children of the Jungle* (2011), was filmed in the region near where the institute is located (Barabas, 2011). Currently, the DRC is untravellable except by members of aid organizations. It's unreasonable for me to expect to visit in the current political climate. In that sense, this documentary allowed for visuals that clarified things like the density of the jungle, the specific colors and sizes of the leaves and how heavy the rain falls during the rainy season. The men and women in the film used giant leaves as umbrellas, which is an example of one detail that I incorporated into the story to add depth. Though all of these descriptions of research connected to worldbuilding, what I want to make clear is that how my characters move, live and breathe within their setting was in the forefront of my mind as I wrote.

I wanted to be able to *visualize* where my characters lived and worked in order to get a sense of place. Likewise, I also wanted to visualize what they wore. It may seem trivial, but aesthetics are important to me. While I've seen photos from the time period, I wanted to see *specifically* what women were wearing in order to describe the dress of

both Mary--whose style I consider rather plain--particularly in contrast to the Belgian women she meets in the Congo, who are much more fashionable. Besides images from Burns' documentary, which were mostly black-and-white, I was able to closely examine the film *A United Kingdom*, which is set immediately after the war and based on a book by Susan Williams (author of *Spies in the Congo*) (Asante, 2016). I used the women's dress in that film as inspiration and description of my own characters' dress in order to incorporate realistic details that bring life to characters such as Oceane Van Aller. I want to note that while *A United Kingdom* was filmed in modern day Botswana (what was then called Bechuanaland), I was careful not to create a conglomerate of "Africa" in my visual descriptions of place or character (Asante, 2016). Once I had a broader understanding of their settings--the world around and outside of them--I felt like I could then focus on internal aspects of characters, as well as how they interacted with each other.

I was born in Minnesota in 1985, forty years after World War II ended. The distance in time and space that separates me from my characters is a bridge I aimed to construct while writing this novel. Mary, the main character, is a Midwestern woman like I am, yet she was born two generations before me (the same year as my grandmother), and travels thousands of miles to colonial Africa through a warzone. The characters she encounters there are complicated in that they are likewise situated in a time and place wholly unknown to me. This speaks to perhaps my most important goal through this process, to really understand my characters in their contemporaneous settings--to anchor them in a time and place I could never personally experience.

Those early drafts were when I got to know Mary's temperament, how she operated, and who she needed to meet in the Congo to thwart her desires and present limitations--those characters such as Tuur Smet and Sister Manon. Beyond just the

characters who are foils to Mary on a smaller scale, in a larger sense I needed to understand the limitations placed on a woman in 1940s wartime, and more specifically, a woman working in agriculture. Ultimately, I needed to know what Mary was up against. I also realized I couldn't take for granted how far expectations and attitudes toward women have changed since that time.

Her War, a composite of stories written by women involved in wartime activity, helped to give me sense of individual women's attitudes who were, essentially, fighting for their right to fight (Dobie & Lang, 2003). While Mary isn't *directly* involved in wartime activity, she does justify to herself and others that she is. The stories also clued me in to both the mindset and the specific language that enterprising young women were using at the time.

One character who I struggled with was Malu. I asked myself: *Who am I to write this man's story?* He's a middle-aged Congolese man whose father was born before any white men had settled in *Kongo*. This was one of my most pertinent concerns as I wrote. I wanted to create a tension between him and Mary in that while he may find Mary *decent*, he doesn't want to see any more Americans (or white colonialists) staking claim in a country that has already been infiltrated by the Belgians and then later the English. Also, to put it plainly, he has more important problems than Mary. He has a separate world of very serious concerns spanning from his wife's illness (which will unfold further as the story unravels), to being watched by the local police force, to harboring feelings of resistance toward colonists during a tense period where Congolese men, women and children were required to collect rubber and uranium for the war. At one point in the novel, Malu will be forced to work in the uranium mine, where workers experienced what was "a year's worth of uranium" in a span of two weeks (Williams, 2016, p. 6). This will

lead to increased tension between characters such as Liombi and Mary, as well as Mary and Thomas.

Two different texts helped me get a deeper understanding of Congolese characters, Malu specifically. The first was *King Leopold's Ghost*, a comprehensive history of colonial Congo from the late 1800s until Leopold "sold" the colony to the country of Belgium (Hochschild, 1998). This work, along with *Congo: The Epic History of a People* by David Van Reybrouck (2014) gave me a much deeper understanding of Malu's past, a past which informs his present. See, I know Mary's ancestors because they're in a *sense* my own. But I felt I had to know where Malu came from in order to write where he was headed.

As Van Reybrouck (2014) points out in his anthology, there are not many records left of *actual* Congolese voices from those time periods between early colonization and WWII. His work allowed me to hear the voices of the men (few women) who actually lived through both eras. As I mentioned earlier, one thing I learned through these testimonials was that Congolese citizens were forced to collect rubber and uranium during WWII (just as they had been forced to collect rubber during early colonization). I don't think this is something that is widely understood by Americans and Europeans today. Would the Allies have won the war without that Congolese uranium? Some historians argue the bombs were unnecessary, superfluous even--that the war was already won. But what would have happened if Axis Forces had control over the uranium mines? Would the war have ended differently? These questions are all speculation, but I think they highlight the important role that the Belgian Congo played in World War II.

Beyond highlighting the role that Shinkolobwe, the Congolese uranium mine, played in World War II, I also aimed to explore themes of imperialism and colonialism

within the novel. I worked to present small vignettes and understated scenes of colonial life in Africa. I am aware of the danger of looking back at the past and judging from today's perspectives--hindsight is 20/20 in terms of the injustices of imperialism. In that sense, I work to create a balance between fascinating storytelling on one hand, while on the other examining Mary and other white colonist's hubris and sense of superiority, being careful of avoiding outright criticism of what she sees there. I simply don't believe a woman from Iowa in the 1940s could stroll into a colonial setting and begin righting wrongs and demanding equality for all.

Mary isn't a white savior, and the story can't end that way. As I continue to work on the novel, another theme I want to examine is disillusionment with the world. Perhaps this is a universal theme for young men and women coming into their own and "growing up." This theme will be compounded by what Mary witnesses and is forced to deal with the Belgian Congo. On a personal level, this happens during her first meeting with Tuur Smet, when she is told she will not be working as a scientist but as a teacher. On a grander scale, Mary will be forced to reckon with serious human rights' violations and the impacts of forced imperialism in her own way. It won't be an easy process or a swift call for justice, but more of a painful unravelling. However, these chapters have yet to be written.

I met with Professor Chancellor in early fall 2018 to discuss my draft and how to best prepare my MFA applications. Thanks to all her help from choosing where to apply, to writing my Statement of Purposes, I was able to focus my attention on the application season. With both Professor Chancellor's and Dr. Gwyn's assistance through the application process, I was accepted to North Carolina State's MFA program. There, I will continue to write and revise this work until it's a finished novel! The exclamation mark is

well-placed, and I look forward to further exploring this new story set within an old world. There's more to uncover within our collective past, and that's my goal for the future of this novel.

THE INSTITUTE: A WORK OF FICTION

One

Mary squinted to find the blurred horizon line in all the pearly ether of a snowy Midwestern twilight. Through the small kitchen window black soil and white snow met in an untidy patchwork of landscape. She stood over the old porcelain sink and scrubbed her hands with the freezing well water; the smell of its minerals filled the kitchen. She was cleaning off the day's work—cow piss, horse hairs, kerosene. It all circled down the drain while she watched night fall through the window. She was tired of the same arguments. They did the opposite of their intent. Instead of changing her mind, they hardened her resolve.

"I'm going. It's decided." She wanted that to be the end of it. She wanted it to be her decision, without anyone questioning her or circling around to the same discussion night after night. There was no talking her out of this.

"It is *not* decided, Mary," her mother replied. "You can't go there. It's—" she seemed to struggle for the right words but nothing came.

"It's dangerous, Mary. It's irresponsible. There's so much to do here. How could you possibly come up with a plan like this now, in the middle of a god damned world war?" Her mother's breath caught--the Lord's name, right there in her kitchen.

"Women are begging to work on farms and Wickard is over in Washington dragging his feet—releasing convicts and importing Canadians. Anything to keep a woman off a tractor. Even if we got the WLA running, it'll be just like the last time. City women fundraising in lipstick and bloomers for measly salaries, sleeping in outbuildings with fleas and bedbugs while farmers profit and pray for the day they can hire a man again. And as soon as the war is over, it's back to the kitchens for the girls, their war

work a necessary evil of the past. And you both know I can't cook worth a damn." She scoffed, hoping that would lighten the mood. Her mother just shook her head.

"Listen, Mary," her father was half-scolding, half-pleading with her, "you can't leave now, in the middle of the war. You've worked so hard with the Garden Association. Listen to you, worrying about yourself, some kind of working woman fantasy while boys are dying over there. Who needs a salary now; who needs a career? Where's your sense of duty? What will you do with that fancy job if we lose this war? Farming will save soldiers and *that's* why you ought to stay. Besides, you'll have H-U-A-C out here, once you tell the boys at the Fort what your plan is. The Belgians are sympathizers and that's the least of it. It's shameful, truly, shameful. This isn't like you." He kept talking, but she stopped hearing.

She peered out the window. A gray horizon stretched on endlessly. She felt no shame. This was an old argument—she'd been fighting with them her whole life. She did want her father's blessing, and in the beginning, she hoped he would understand, but his arguments were getting more desperate, more urgent. She wasn't un-American; she believed that in her heart. But she knew that sooner or later, the war would end. And she knew that when it ended, women would set down their work boots, their coveralls, their welding tools, everything. They'd set these things down and let them collect dust while they went back to whatever it was they did before the war. And what would Mary do then? Bake pies and sit by the radio, listening to the stories her mother loved so dearly? That future was impossible. It couldn't be.

"I'm not leaving the war behind. There's work to be done on every continent. And the Belgians were invaded. It was in the papers. That makes them prisoners of war, *not* sympathizers. Besides, the Institute employs plenty of Brits and Frenchmen, and old Bert

is there, too." She turned away from the window and walked out of the kitchen, "I'm tired. I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm going to the Fort tomorrow," she called behind her.

Two

The general sat at his desk reading Mary's paperwork. He was sweating through his uniform, clear through his jacket, the radiator behind him expelling a wet heat. It was a windy and frigid February day. Outside, brown grass poked through a thousand miniature snow drifts that covered the vast lawns of Fort Des Moines. The floor creaked beneath the general's chair as he shifted from elbow to elbow, both resting on the desk where he was propping up Mary's papers. He sat silently for ten minutes, slowly examining each document.

He briefly looked up over the papers, scrutinizing Mary's face. Her green, brown, hazel eyes. Her brownish, blondish hair, which was long and poorly styled. She had no skill for that kind of thing; she only strived to look neat. And what else did he see? Everything in the middle, everything something other than what it seemed. She was tall, but not too tall. She didn't own a pair of pumps to accentuate her height. She was thin, but wide hips and broad shoulders kept people from noticing. He went back to the files, eyes narrowed. She watched his eyes move slowly, line by line.

"Well, I see that your requests have gone through. Can't imagine for the life of me how, why or what the hell for, pardon my language, doll." He glared at her. "Here I am training an army of girls, I even got a squad of colored girls. And you come along requesting to travel to Africa. And I'll tell you what, I stamped a big N-O right on your file. But someone higher up than me out there in New York or Washington or," he gestured vaguely eastward, "must have thought that sending an unwed, civilian farm girl to Africa during the War wasn't such a bad idea. What the hell do I know, anyway?" He was scowling, looking directly into her eyes as if something there would answer all his questions. She looked back blankly.

"It's a farming institute, and they do good work. There's war in Africa, too."

"You think I don't know that?"

"No, sir. I think you do. It's—"

"Here's the thing, doll." He cut her off. "They need you to sign some forms, agree to be put on a list of friendlies in case they need you. For God knows what, I could not begin to comprehend. They apparently got some boys there, probably watching the Belgians since their king's busy playing house with Hitler. They even sent you some kind of Army booklet about life in Africa, as if they," he again gestured eastward, "don't have enough to worry about, now they're sending Iowa girls off to fancy farms." He shook his head, disgusted.

"They were occupied. It was in the papers," she said quietly.

He took a large stamp and slammed it onto her request-to-travel form. He never took his eyes off of her.

There were women training in the snow. Great groups of them responding to commands that Mary couldn't interpret. She stood and watched them until she realized that they were watching her, and she hurried along. The possibility of joining their ranks occurred to her, of course it did, but she wasn't a soldier. She was a farmer, and farmers could win the war, all the slogans insisted on that. She could stay in Iowa and fight tooth and nail against men so old their hands shook and backs humped, telling her that women shouldn't be working the fields or threshing the hay or milking the cows. That had been man's work for millennia, as far as they knew. They'd rather hire foreign men from the North and South of them than watch a lady heave manure, something she'd been doing with her father since she could remember.

She could stay, but what would happen when the war ended? She'd have to find a veteran and marry him. She had put it off for too long already; she could sense disapproval during conversations with old schoolmates, friends of her parents. She would have some babies and raise some chickens. No more grease-stained fingers after oiling tractor parts. No more sweat dripping from her brow after a long day pulling tassels. She'd be fixing the sandwiches then, scrubbing his soil-stained coveralls. All these thoughts ran through her head as she passed barrack after barrack of bright red brick, violent and invincible in the white-brown winter landscape. And the WAAC's officers marched this way and that, doing their part for the good of the country.

Three

"Another letter from Dr. Thompson," her mother said curtly and gestured toward the kitchen table—her accent barely perceptible. A tinge of Scandinavia, somewhere far away. She'd missed her own country's independence day by a decade or so, busy working as a housekeeper in a small Iowa farm town. As far as Mary knew, her mother didn't think much about her homeland. Surely, she had no memories of watching the rocky coastline drift away. She was only a young child when her parents left. Yet, she had found a small Norwegian flag somewhere, perhaps in some shop, or maybe a cousin sent it over after the dissolution of the union. She kept it in the kitchen. It was only a few inches wide and perpetually erect, waving over her personal domain. Scandinavia was no longer free--invaded early in the war, but if it bothered her more than the other news coming out of Europe, she never let on.

There was Bert's name, and under it an address that ended in "*Congo Belge*." She read the letter silently. He was helping her arrange the trip, though Pan Am flew from Brazil to Léopoldville regularly, not all pilots would agree to give a woman a ride, especially a civilian.

Her mother was busy in kitchen, coming up and down the cellar stairs carrying a new string of onions to hang by the range, a jar of canned beans, and a jar of strawberry preserves that lost their color, now a sickly looking gray-pink that tasted less like strawberries than it did of sugar.

Mary was rereading the letter when her mother interrupted.

"This is your father's fault."

She didn't respond right away. It would not be enough to say that they had this conversation before. Since Mary had decided on leaving, her mother had taken many

opportunities to comment on the dangers of Africa, the dangers of spinsterhood. So, Mary sat and fingered the burls in the kitchen table, tracing a pattern from whirl to whirl on the knotted wood. She'd sat there years before, when she told her parents she was leaving for college to get an agricultural degree. Her father didn't believe her at first--that such a college existed. He insisted she was being swindled, that a traveling salesman had taken her for a fool. You can't learn about farming in a schoolhouse. This he insisted, but then she did.

Her mother interrupted again. "He raised you like a son because I never gave him one." She felt that somehow her mother was placing this blame squarely on Mary's own shoulders. "But I never stopped him. I never told him, 'Peder, I've got things to teach this girl, too. Things she needs to learn.' Now here we are. You are leaving us to travel across the world, thinking maybe there they will let a woman be a farmer—that women don't get married and cook suppers and pluck chickens in the jungle. And maybe they don't because I don't know about this Congo. I should have taught you better, Mary. That was my job and he took it away, and now you are leaving us."

"I'm not leaving *because* of Father or in spite of you, Mother. I'm leaving for my career, for a new opportunity. Scientists there are doing amazing things, creating drought and insect-resistant hybrids. Work that will change farming forever, science that will make it easier to feed people all over the world. This is important war work, maybe the most important work there is."

"These words—career, opportunity, science. I have no use for them. You don't need them. We have this," she said, shaking her hands angrily around her. "We have this farm. We wake up, we work, we collect eggs, we feed the town and ourselves. No career, no science." Her mother stopped for a moment, then continued on quietly, barely a

whisper. “It’s our lives, Mary. And you leave it for a dream of a thing that you already hold in your hands.”

Mary peered at her for a moment. Her mother’s eyes downward, closely examining the garlic thread. “It’s not just that, Mother. There are so many reasons to go to Africa, to take this job. I’m not needed here, despite what you think. And we’re so close to getting these beans right, they’ll be able to grow in an inch of water. Bert’s there now, working on the strain himself.”

Her mother scoffed and shook her head.

It was true that Mary believed she wasn’t needed in Iowa. Her father managed most of the farm work himself. He had hired a boy, some superfluous youngest son of a nearby farmer, or even a town boy, when he needed an extra set of hands, but for the most part he managed quite well after Mary left for college. Once she realized that after a couple years spent in Ames, she felt a sting that never quite left her. She also didn’t believe she was needed by the WLA. She’d worked hard the last year, building contacts, traveling back and forth across the state. She even travelled to Washington once and sat in the same room as Mrs. Roosevelt in an effort to get the Land Army organized. But Secretary Wickard wouldn’t fund it, farmers wouldn’t pay women fair wages while they worked in the fields, and so Iowa’s Garden Association was still fighting to gain female employment. Women were begging to work field jobs and being turned down flat. They were instead told to plant gardens, salvage their cans, write love letters to their men abroad.

It wasn’t like that everywhere. Some WLA groups sprung up overnight out West, a few in New England, women picking apples and hauling combines full of corn to elevators. These groups weren’t official or government-sanctioned, but the women had

insisted on working and the farmers finally acquiesced to hire them. Mary tried to feel glad that the movement was gaining momentum, but what she really felt was jealousy, maybe even resentment. The old men in Iowa weren't interested in seeing women in the fields, not even temporarily.

And so, Mary quit pushing back. She'd simply leave them here to figure it out on their own. If they didn't want to hire a woman to detassle corn or milk a cow, then they could do the work themselves. She would leave them to it while she worked in the laboratories of a world-class farming institute. That would show them, wouldn't it? She would go where she was wanted.

Four

Mon nom est Mary

Je suis un Américain.

Je suis un scientifique.

Mary shut the book, too distracted to study. What she needed was a French tutor, but all she could find was an old French language book in a dusty corner of the library. It would have to do, but the pronunciation of the affected and unfamiliar letters confused her. Bert assured her that a large portion of the Belgian scientists spoke English, but she wanted to be prepared. She couldn't find a Flemish language dictionary at the library, and she doubted she could learn enough of both languages in the next few weeks anyway.

Bert had been Mary's favorite professor at Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. Dr. Robert Thompson was a composite of chalk dust and pomade. His unkempt gray hair working hard to free itself from the wax, sticking up wildly in every direction. But he was passionate about hybrids and the impact that crop manipulation could have on the world, and his zeal spread to Mary. She appreciated that he treated her as an equal. Some of the professors refused to work with the women's classes, others found it amusing, as if they were girls playing dress-up in their father's work boots. But Bert would march into class and explain to them what he was working on and then look on anxiously, waiting for someone to tell him what he was missing, the next step he ought to take. It was exciting. He left for the Institute a year before war broke out in Europe. Mary was nearly obsessed with his research and the exotic lengths to which he'd gone to finish the work on soybean hybrids, which could grow in varied climates with different soils, temperature and rainfall averages.

All it took was a simple letter. She sent it out, not sure what to expect, not sure if or how a letter could reach the interior of Africa during the war. She had no idea what it looked like, the place where the letter landed. He responded within a few weeks. He had insisted that even now, even during wartime, that the Institute would be thrilled to have a fresh face in their midst. They could certainly get her the documentation; they could guarantee her clean living conditions; they would be thrilled to work with her. *Thrilled.*

It was a convoluted route, no simple line of dots across the Atlantic Ocean indicating a direct trip. She would have to travel down through Brazil, across the Ascensions and on to Léopoldville, the capital. From there it was equally as complicated, another flight to a patch of land outside Stanleyville, an often-impassable road, an automobile in Yangambi to schedule, which was difficult considering the variables involved. The distance overwhelmed her, the number of miles and countries she would watch below her. Thankfully she lived for timelines, for charts, and details, and deadlines.

She had worked the last year coordinating for the Farm and Garden Association, putting her energy into an organization that was met with at best lukewarm interest and at worst flat-out refusal. She was desperate to organize, to plot and plan and be a part of something dynamic. And as it turned out, she also lived for farming. These parallels met somewhere, and that's where her vision carried her. She thought about arranging her trip to Yangambi like she thought about any complicated task, breaking things down into small, manageable parts and arranging them in a sensible way meant no task was unmanageable. Certainly not Africa, certainly not reaching thirty without a husband--though her mother most certainly disagreed on both accounts.

Planning the actual trip, even with Bert's help, required endless telephone calls, which meant endless trips into town to use the phone. She felt guilty every time she read the sign plastered near the public phone in the county clerk's office. It was outdated now, hung before Christmastime. A round and jolly Santa Claus held a picket sign reminding her not to make unneeded long-distance calls. Mary looked away and began jotting down notes on scrap paper. Another luxury that was frowned upon by Santa Claus and Mother Mary and Franklin Roosevelt himself. Paper was scarce.

Once the route was confirmed, there was nothing to do but wait. Convincing her father to drive her to the train in Elmore was the most difficult part of the trip to confirm. Initially, he flat out refused until she told him she would purposely hitch a ride with the hobos running from the war, the ones who refused to serve and refused to work. If there was one thing her father despised, it was a conscientious objector.

Mary had been three years old when the first war started. Her father left her and her mother to fight. She didn't know where he had been or what he had seen, and she didn't know if he had ever told her mother those things either. But he had Allied principles, through and through, and wouldn't see his daughter consorting with communists. It was bad enough she was going to work with the Belgians.

Five

Without powder a gun is nothing but a stick.

African Proverb

The first thing Mary noticed about the pocket-sized field guide given to her by the general at Fort Des Moines was the stamp on the inside cover. “For use of Military Personnel only.” She held the thin brown booklet and flipped the pages through her hands. Obviously, someone had made a mistake in sending it to her, and she wondered if that was how she got the permission to travel. Maybe someone had mixed up her file. Maybe someone with an untidy desk accidentally stamped her request with a “YES” that was meant for a Texaco employee or rubber tycoon. The entire field guide was filled with information about resources in West Africa. She wasn’t even technically going to the region listed on the booklet’s map.

But suddenly a thought came to her. Perhaps the little field guide *was* meant for her. Perhaps someone was familiar with their work at Iowa State, the work on soybean hybrids. Resilient crops were certainly a valuable resource, after all. And she had traveled to Washington late last year and met a number of bureaucrats. The thought that the United States government itself was encouraging her trip, her *move* to Africa, excited her.

“Mary?”

“What?”

“I asked if you packed the medicine recommended by Dr. Overby.”

“Yes, I did. The malaria medicine. Mother’s preserves. The revolver, though I think that thing is older than you are.”

“You’re comfortable with that gun, and I’m comfortable knowing you have it.”

"What for? All the alligators I'll be hunting down by the river? All the cannibals lurking in the jungle? To protect myself from becoming a human sacrifice?" Mary was laughing at her own joke. Her father was ignoring her, looking out the window as the old farm truck carried them northward. Wisps of snow particles blew across the gravel, small silver clouds. The flat earth of plowed fields stretched on around them for miles. They passed the Halverson farm. Their son Michael died early on, somewhere in the Pacific surrounded by palm trees and aquamarine ocean water. Mary looked around at the gray winter. Probably no two places on earth could be more different. She wondered if in his last moments he pictured what she was looking at now.

Her father cleared his throat. "I never wanted a son," he said, quietly. "Your mother always thought that's why I had you out in the fields with me. But that wasn't it. I liked having you with me and you liked doing the work, too. I never wanted a son. I went off to fight in the war, and I thanked God each and every night I lay in those holes that you were what you were. And I swore you'd be my only child, and that you'd be safe from ever having to fight in the trenches."

"I—" Mary stopped, not sure what to say.

"I remember when you were just a little thing, no bigger than a melon. I would watch you there in your basket, while your mother cooked dinner or did the washing. It wasn't that long ago, though you won't believe me when I say it. I can close my eyes and see you lying there in your basket." He spoke softly, plainly.

There was a moment of choice. Just a brief, quiet moment, but Mary wasn't accustomed to moments like these, so she brushed it off. She chose to move past it, and what else could she do? Tell him to turn the truck around? Reach over and grab his hand,

brush his shoulder? The moment passed. She looked out the window; she looked ahead, out of the windshield. Together they sat in the silence.

Six

Soldiers rode mules on the beach. The sand was marked with hoof prints. A hot breeze blew as Mary calculated the season. Summer was coming to an end in the southern hemisphere. She had left Iowa two weeks previous, in the middle of a cold snap, but surely it wouldn't be long before the snow melted, and buds began to blossom. Mary stood in strawberry-stained blouse and trousers.

Her mother's preserves exploded in her trunk somewhere over the Caribbean Sea. Though she dreaded looking untidy, she could only find one clothing store. It was filled with floral prints and bold colors and tight-fitting blouses that were too fancy for everyday use. The Brazilians certainly had style, but Mary couldn't imagine wearing those clothes, so she scrubbed her own as best she could and hoped that she could find more suitable attire in Léopoldville.

So, she stood at the ocean for the first time in her life in strawberry-stained clothes. A memory surfaced, sitting in a classroom learning about the oceans in grade school. On the map the oceans were cordoned off, sectioned and named, neat and orderly. But looking at the great expanse of the Atlantic, she questioned how anyone could ever be sure where one ended and another began. One ocean-filled planet, one planet-sized ocean.

She had been waiting in Natal for several days now. News of a Polish massacre was making the news, covering the front of all the papers. Still, the war felt far away now. It was impossible for her to take in all the sights and sounds of Brazil. Her anticipation filtered every new experience. She wanted to get to where she was going, to get settled and to start her work.

She had brought several farming manuals with her and spent most of her time studying hybridization and crop resistance. Mary mostly kept to herself in her small hotel room near the airfield. When she wasn't reading, she was at Parnamirim harassing the pilot who was slotted to fly her to Léopoldville. The airfield was an endless buzz of activity and the pilot insisted he would call her as soon as they got the okay to cross the Atlantic. So, she finally decided to make her way down to the beach.

The sun was beginning to set. Low clouds spread across the sky, a mellow purple-pink hue reflected off the water, giving a dreamlike effect. Couples strolled on the edge of the surf, the waves splashing up their skirts and pant legs. She turned to leave and saw a man standing nearby, watching her watch the water. He was tanned, which made his blond hair look a few shades lighter than it was. "It's beautiful here, isn't it?" he asked. His accent was American but nondescript, no Southern drawl or Yankee dialect.

"I've never seen anything like it," she said politely. She didn't want to come across as available; servicemen had a reputation in Natal.

"Care for a stroll?" He gestured towards the line in the surf where lovers walked aimlessly, where seaweed collected in wet mossy bundles. When he saw her reaction, he held his hands out peaceably and smiled. "I'm harmless, I promise."

Mary was lonely and restless, so far from home. She was in a state of anticipation, of delay; she was constantly reminded of her own waiting. All her feelings were magnified by the heat and by the sunset, lit with lavender and pale pink. There was an intensity around her, spreading from the sky, all around Natal, the airfield and Army bases, the night streets and bars filled with soldiers drinking Cuba Libres learning to dance the Samba. Wartime fervor, so far from the war. And he *was* handsome and tall, taut muscles and tanned skin.

"Sure, a short walk," she said with an attitude that suggested caution, almost like a warning.

"Dan Miller out of Gary, Indiana. Heading to French Africa for work."

"Mary Elkhorn, heading to Belgian Africa for work." She was proud of that. She smiled knowingly, thinking how surprised he must be, this woman waiting to travel to Africa for war work. She was no nurse, no operator at the switchboard; she wasn't even a farmerette working in the fields for free. She had a job to do.

"I'll be, what are the chances? What kind of work?"

"I'm a scientist. Research on crop hybridization in the farming institute the Belgians built there on the Congo river."

"Well isn't that a mouthful? A lady scientist, in my midst. I'm in rubber. Nothing fancy, but it assists in the war effort, in its own way."

They walked and talked. He listened attentively as she discussed soybean manipulation and how the soil pH differs from Iowa plain to Congolese rainforest. She listened distractedly as he told her about the wild rubber that grew in vines all across western Africa. Wild rubber was harder to harvest, but free and replenished itself, and the natives offered to assist in the collection to do their part during the world war. She found that they had taken a turn and were walking toward town. They talked the whole time; they discussed various aspects of growing up in the Midwest. There was snow shoveling and watering holes, church picnics and Saturday nights in town. So, they talked it all over, their futures and then their pasts, until there were people walking on either side of them, well-lit shops with doors held open to the passersby.

"Want a drink?" he asked.

"Oh, no. I shouldn't. I'm not that kind of a girl." She blurted it out then blushed, immediately wishing she hadn't said it. He didn't seem like that kind of boy.

He laughed. "What kind of a girl? The kind who doesn't get thirsty?" His eyes were gray-blue in the lights of the marques that lit the street. *Casablanca* and *To The Shores of Tripoli* were showing at the theater down the street. The heat was unrelenting, even after the sun was completely lost behind the horizon.

Mary sighed. One drink wouldn't hurt. As a matter of fact, she was thirsty, and she was also sweating down her back and legs. She watched the giant fans twirl slowly on the ceiling of the cafe. "One drink," she said.

Seven

J'ai trop bu hier soir.

Une rencontre embarrassante.

Un trajet en avion à travers la vaste mer.

She believed for a moment that her vision was permanently damaged. Bright sunlight streamed into her hotel room through the thin draperies. She reached for her watch on the nightstand. Ten am. She turned over and lay on her back, groaning. A fly buzzed from one corner of the ceiling to another, looking for an escape back to the wild world outside. Her hand smacked down over her face. She covered her eyes as if she was hiding from the fly in embarrassment. She had not had one drink. She had several. And then there was Dan. Daniel Miller from Gary, Indiana.

She was right about one thing, he wasn't that kind of guy. But she was wrong about another thing. She *was* that kind of girl. Or at least she was after several glasses of cachaça. Though it was made from sugar cane, it burned harshly going down. The cafe's ice boxes were broken, so they were serving warm drink. She felt nauseous even recalling the drinks going down, a fierce burning from her chest rose up into her nose.

She remembered it all clearly. Weren't you supposed to forget nights like that, after too many drinks? The memories weren't even hazy, though she desperately wished they were. But like a gentleman, he had turned her down gently. She had leaned in for a kiss, and he gently turned his head, shaking it just ever so slightly. But that rejection along with the alcohol--mostly the alcohol--was unsuitable to Mary.

They were talking about college, the classes they took, the friends they made. Daniel asked Mary whether she had any boyfriends during college, whether she did any dating. She told him about a few dates she went on, nothing serious. She was invested in

her studies, she insisted. But Daniel objected, she was far too beautiful to be single for so long. How could it be? he asked. The drink had warmed her cheeks, warmed some dormant feelings that she usually kept tied down inside. And she was so far from home, wasn't she? And the salty sea air, the unrelenting heat of the night, and surely the drinks loosened the knots.

They were saddled up to the bar, standing so closely in the crowded cafe. She leaned in, kissed his cheek, waited. But he stood still, not moving. She leaned in further until he was forced to turn his head away from her. It shocked her, his subtle rejection. She was surprised by his refusal. She was also drunk—very drunk.

So, she slapped him, then and there. She barely had enough room to swing her arm back with all the soldiers and Brazilian women crushing in around them. The sound reverberated, and all the soldiers and all the women laughed and joked with each other when they realized what happened.

She groaned again, and her head pounded violently. She was mortified. She had little experience with alcohol, a few nights with the girls in Ames. What came over her? She laid and watched the fly on the ceiling for a long time, until there was a knock on the door. She nearly screamed out loud. Of course, Daniel would find her to apologize, of course he would. He was a real gentleman.

She dressed quickly and opened the door hesitantly. A clerk handed her a message. The pilot had called the hotel. She was to pack up and meet him at Parnamirim; it was time to go. "Oh, thank God," she murmured. She felt an immense amount of relief. She could leave Natal and Daniel Miller and cachaça behind her. It was time to go.

Eight

You have been hearing a lot about Dakar. It is the capital of French West Africa and its largest city; in fact it is the most modern city in all of West Africa. Its harbor, situated only 1,632 miles from Brazil, is large, modern and well equipted. It is important that Dakar should remain in friendly hands. -Pocket Guide to West Africa

The commotion at the airfield exacerbated her hangover. She found herself involuntarily covering her ears to dampen the sound of the airplanes, which are normally loud, but the aftereffects of the alcohol made them deafening. She wandered through the field looking for her pilot, a Texan working for Pan Am. He had flown Glenn Miller and some members of his Army band a few months back. He told Mary the whole story, nearly screaming so she could hear during the trip from Belem to Natal. She spotted him a few planes ahead and made her way toward him. Her trunk was intercepted by a group of soldiers in order to be loaded. They drove past in a truck full of mail, boxes of supplies, and her trunk sitting there in the back, all headed to Africa.

"Boy am I happy to see you." She smiled weakly as he assisted her with the rest of her luggage.

He looked nervous and frowned at her. He looked almost frightened. "The plans have changed. I hate to tell you like this, but I had orders. I'm to head to Dakar in French West Africa."

Mary shook her head. "No, I'm not going to French West Africa. I'm going to the Belgian Congo. I have a job waiting for me."

"Listen, lady. I was told to take you and a Clipper to Dakar. I can ask about getting you to the Congo after that, but I just follow orders, all right?" He drawled slowly. He didn't seem very apologetic.

"Me and the Clipper? I don't understand."

"Someone's waiting in the automobile to take us down to the harbor so we can take a big Boeing, got lots of other goods to bring to Dakar after the invasion. Maybe he'll have some answers. Sorry." He shrugged and ushered her toward the car. She walked to the vehicle, unsure of what she was doing. She didn't understand what he meant by Dakar. She had heard of it before, when the troops took Northern Africa. *Torch*, that's what they had called it. But why would there be orders for her to go there? She wasn't enlisted, after all. Questions floated around in her mind, which was performing far below capacity.

She pulled open the car door and sat inside, letting her eyes adjust to the dimness.

"Hi, Mary."

She froze.

"I'm sorry to reroute your trip, but I have orders from my superiors. You were on our list and we need your help.".

She looked at him blankly for a minute and then exited the vehicle.

He called after her, but she couldn't make it out over the noise of the airfield. He ran out after her and met her face to face. "I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"Told me what?" She yelled over the clamor of the airfield. "Told me that you sought me out, to what, interview me? For the Army?" Thoughts swam through her head. The sun was blazing from above and below, as the packed mud of the airfield simultaneously absorbed and emitted the noontime heat.

"It's not the Army. You will only be asked for information, to watch and observe the scientists at the institute. That's where you're headed, right? We have everything on file. I was sent to assess you, be sure you weren't some kind of socialist."

"I—" Mary stopped, dumbfounded. "A socialist?"

He gestured toward the automobile. "Come on, I'll explain inside."

She nodded vaguely. She felt sick. The heat was unforgiving. The field was swarming. She bent over and vomited on both of their feet.

Nine

Je suis un fermier.

Je suis un espion.

Je suis malade de l'alcool.

The proposition was relatively simple. Mary observed the Belgians at the institute and reported back any suspicious behavior to Daniel at his office in Dakar. He was undercover working with an American rubber company, so her letters required a code, which he would teach her. Nothing too complicated, he mostly wanted names and any mention of resources.

The Nazis needed hard diamonds and other minerals, and they were believed to be smuggling them out of the Congo. He didn't have a lot of details but assured her that it would not be dangerous. They simply wanted a list of sympathizers in the region, and her job at the institute allowed them to have access to a large community of Belgians who could potentially be assisting German smugglers. All she had to do was keep her eyes open and report back. It was the least she could do for her country, he insisted. And everyone in the region, everyone in the world, was fighting for a cause in one way or another.

Mary was sick for the rest of the flight. She was also shivering with cold, until Daniel offered her his coat and fur hat. Only her face stayed warm, flushed with constant embarrassment. Up until this point, most of Mary's flights had been short. Quick jumps from Miami to San Juan, San Juan to Port-of-Spain and so on. But this flight was over nine hours, by far the longest she'd ever taken. Sitting next to her was a man who had so easily fooled her, rejected her advances and happened to be some kind of undercover agent for the United States Government. She questioned whether he worked in rubber, if

Daniel was actually his real name. She finally turned away from him and drifted off to a fitful sleep despite the cold, the noise and her wounded pride.

They landed in the port of Dakar at dusk. A few cargo ships sat far out, close to the open sea. A group of natives fished from an old wooden raft. Mary wondered if they felt the sting of war too, if they worried about U-Boats stalking their quiet harbor. She certainly did, now that she was here in the midst of a war zone. The night was dark, a new moon. The stars were starting to shine through the blue-gray twilight. The sun had only just set, and dark was falling fast, no sunset colors streaked the sky.

The city surrounding the port was flat, a few shadowed buildings sat near the port itself. She couldn't tell who they housed or what their purposes were. She didn't recognize their designs; square-shaped buildings full of windows but no elegant arches or exotic beauty—what she could see was newly built for function. She hadn't known what to expect, but what she saw was modern-looking and haphazard, not what she expected to find in Africa or in a French colony.

As Mary disembarked the Clipper, she stepped cautiously onto the long dock. It swayed under her step, warped planks threatening decay. A man stood on the beach several yards away, his trousers rolled up. He seemed to be admiring the first few stars gathering to build constellations. Daniel took Mary's arm in his, she resisted stiffly until he gave her a cold look.

"A nice night for stargazing," Daniel said to the man.

"A nice night for a walk on the beach," the man responded without looking at them. He nodded at them both as if saying farewell and turned around toward the sparse street scene that sat before the group. Daniel told the pilot that men would come for the bags, and began to walk to beach, following in the man's footsteps.

“Stay on the path,” he told Mary. “There may be a stray mine that was missed.”

Ten

The man never even shared his name with Mary. They had followed him to a two story, unpainted office that read *American Foreign Services*. He waited for them behind his desk, an ancient thing that looked like it had been left by the early French colonists simply because it was too heavy to move. One lightbulb blinked above their heads, threatening darkness at any moment.

"Sorry for the secrecy," the man said. "What we ask is really not as clandestine as all this. We have several American informants throughout Africa. Some are collecting primates in the heart of the rainforest, others are exporting rubber, silk, oil or diamonds. We just ask that while you are working here in Africa, you do a small part to help win the war." He stopped talking and looked at Mary, waiting for a response.

"Yes," Mary said, confused. "That's exactly what Daniel has already told me." She couldn't understand why they had taken her all this way to have this man repeat what Daniel already told her, what he could have told her their first meeting. They could have avoided the scene in the cafe, the hangover, all the secrets. They simply could have written her a letter before she had even left, and she would have gladly agreed to keep her eyes out for Nazis and their ilk. She suspected there would be more.

"By morning you can be on a plane to *Congo Belge*. We only need to brief you on a few matters, let you know what to watch for, let you know how to code your letters to Daniel. We sent him to Natal to assess your convictions, but that wasn't the only reason. Your night out together and your short trip here with him. Well," he faltered.

Mary let out a self-righteous gasp.

"You can't be careful enough here in West Africa. A nest of vipers—spies, Nazis, double-agents, British intelligence mistrusting our fellas, us mistrusting them. Even if we

hadn't contacted you and asked for your assistance, which you guaranteed when you signed the forms given to you at Des Moines," he reminded her, "Africa is a dangerous place for an American woman."

And so, they spent the next two hours giving her details both so generalized and contradicting that her head swum for days afterward. They seemed to continually suggest that it was a simple job, not dangerous at all, while simultaneously impressing its importance on her. They would tell her to listen for any kind of talk about resources being redirected, smuggled or stolen. They gave her a list of those resources—diamonds, rubber, oil, ores, but told her that there were others equally as important. Yet, they wouldn't or couldn't name them. They showed her a map of the Congo, the river's many limbs, covering thousands upon thousands of miles. They listed the railroads and the names of the ports and made her repeat them, so she could listen for those too. This, they insisted, was all she had to do, what dozens of Americans were already doing in Africa. Listen and report. And with the cover of her and Daniel as friends, perhaps even lovers, it was possible that he would visit her in Yangambi if the need arose.

Mary argued that would not be necessary. That it was a farming institute, and farmers were of a breed, moral folk, men of the land. Of course, almost all of the farmers she had ever met were Iowans, most of whom she'd known her whole life. Still, she resisted the idea of subterfuge and defended this place she had never seen. They were working on crop hybridization for the good of the world, after all. Old Bert and his cohort, testing figures and planting seeds. The thought of a group of old farmers running a smuggling ring and aiding Nazis amused and distracted her through most of the briefing. But she agreed that, of course, she would do her part for the good of the country. She felt important, knowing that she was consigned to this task, as ridiculous and

unnecessary as she felt it to be. When the war was over, she would be able to tell her parents that she hadn’t only worked as a scientist, but also a spy.

Eleven

Bienvenue dans votre nouvelle maison.

Un enfant près de la limite des arbres.

Mary rencontre sa femme de chambre.

She never saw the Texan pilot again. She was flown to Léopoldville after staying at the residences in the Foreign Service office. For good measure, Daniel saw her off at the Dakar Airport.

From Léopoldville she was flown to Stanleyville, landing on a straight strip of mud road near the train depot. From the sky she saw a mass of green, but as she got closer, she could make out individual leaves, massive prehistoric-looking things, some large enough to cover her entire midsection. There were banana trees with huge bulges of hanging green fruit. There was a lonely train depot, just a wooden-covered landing.

She met her first Congolese inlander in Stanleyville. A man called Tata who was dressed in a tailored suit, leather loafers and hat. He told her he was promoted to head driver from Stanleyville to Yangambi due to his unparalleled experience navigating the knee-deep mud road that ebbed and flowed with the seasons.

This man talked about roads like some men talked about rivers or ocean waves. It concerned her. He spoke English relatively well, with a thick accent and deep voice, and explained that he learned it from the London Baptists who helped the notably less-devout Belgians bring civilized religion to the tropical continent. He could no longer remember the religion of his ancestors. Every Congolese in the Orientale province is a God-fearing Christian, *oui oui.* He said the world “Christian” like a girl’s name, “Christie Anne,” and knew more about the apostles than Mary could remember forgetting.

Churches were everywhere, crosses slung on shoddy construction, Catholic nuns and Baptist missionaries crossing every street. Buildings painted every shade of mint and periwinkle, pale yellows and pinks. She hardly noticed. She was on the road to Yangambi and finally headed toward her new home. It was late March and the road was still passable, which Tata counted as lucky. The rain would soon pick up, and if she had arrived any later in the season, she may have been forced to take a boat down the Congo, which could take up to two weeks. By car it took only a day. If there was ever a time to thank a civilized God, it was then.

Tata dropped her off in front of a square brick home. They passed through the gates of the institute with no fanfare, after a full day of trudging down the sludge path they called a road. Tata got out and pushed a dozen times and was adamant that Madame Mary did not step foot out of the car to help. While she insisted it was actually "Mademoiselle Mary," he kept on with the "Madame," regardless.

He was appalled by the suggestion that she assist him in the mud and for the rest of the trip spun tales of the near-mythical Belgian, English and French wives he had driven for over the last decade working in Yangambi. Their elegance unrivaled, Mary reminded him sharply that she was working at the institute as an employee, a scientist, not as a wife. He nodded absent-mindedly and finished his story of Madame De Clercq's calfskin pumps that he vigorously scrubbed after she stepped in a large pile of animal dung. The Madame nearly fainted because of it. Mary puzzled over the idea of becoming queasy due to stepping in a pile of manure. She was sure that same incident had occurred in her life uncountable times to an uncountable number of shoes between her first memories until just last month when she left the farm. She was relieved she wouldn't be required to consort often with these Belgian Madames.

The house was simple, a solid brick square with a small concrete front porch which was fronted by a waist-high brick fence. There was an entire neighborhood of identical houses just like the one they assigned to her. Sprinkled throughout the lawns were interspersed copses of banana trees with bulges of unripe, green bananas hanging heavily. The grass was trim and kept short. The scene fulfilled her expectations.

"This is your home now," Tata said with a hint of pride. "Do not confuse with neighbor's house. That happens more than once to everyone new. Tie a string, maybe. Notice your special kola nut tree here. Lively like you, for energy, with pretty flowers, like you, too." Mary looked around, taking in her new home when something strange caught her eye. A boy, younger than a teenager, stood near the bush line watching her. The sun was bright, and the green-tinted shade of the forest played tricks on her eyes. She strained to get a better look. He seemed to be missing his right arm, his face seemed somehow misshapen, swollen or bruised or both. Before she could get a better look, he turned around and was lost in the growth.

"Tata," Mary said, "Did you see that boy? He seemed to be hurt."

"No, Madame. Not hurt. A local boy, back from the mine. No problem. No problem."

Twelve

An inlander woman named Liombi rapped on the door a few moments later and explained that while men regularly worked as servants and caretakers, she was assigned to Madame Mary Elkhorn because she spoke excellent English on account that she was raised by the Baptist missionaries and also because Mary was lacking a husband. It wouldn't be proper to have a boy working along with the Mademoiselle.

Her skin was clear and her face lovely under her tightly-tied pile of mismatched, brightly colored fabrics and head scarf. Mary liked her immediately, perhaps she needed her.

Liombi had her own quarters with her husband in a different area of the grounds. Her husband was well-respected, she insisted, which allowed for her to take up this esteemed position. Most women did not get the opportunity for such work—the opportunity to run a home, head of household. It was embarrassing for Mary, who insisted she would not need a maid, cook, washerwoman, or further assistance with any of the other tasks Liombi was assigned. She would however need a guide, possibly a translator, and after opening her trunk and remembering the jar of strawberries was crushed and had seeped through most of her stowed outfits, a seamstress.

Liombi left Mary's house to gather a list of supplies, insisting that all of the objections Mary had against her service were "no good." While Mary contended that not all American women regularly employed the use of help, particularly where she was from in Iowa, Liombi found it unthinkable. Perhaps Mary was from a poor family who could not afford servants. She had never heard of this place Iowa before. It was not in Belgium, not in Great Britain. The best positions were in the service of colonial households, everyone knew this, and Liombi was uncommonly lucky to acquire this situation.

Regardless of Mary's wishes, the institute simply wasn't conducive to life without servants. The shipment boats delivered goods during the week while the scientists worked, the stock rooms filled with washing soap and cooking supplies were massive and would take a newcomer weeks to navigate. And there was the matter of being unfamiliar with half of the produce, bushmeat and palm oils with which they cooked. It was settled. But first, she must return with something to wash the stains from Mary's soiled clothes.

Thirteen

Mary walked into the administrator's office at 8:30 am. Thirty minutes early with only the faintest hint of jam splotched across the armpit of her blouse. She chose a deep purple color in crisp cotton in an attempt to hide the stains, which mortified her. Though she was not particularly interested in coming across as fashionable, it troubled her to come across as sloppy.

The buildings on the grounds were mostly brick, the same brick as her new home, and felt inviting to her. They didn't appear at odds against the lush green backdrop. The administrator's office was in a large rectangular building filled with dark wood and a grand stairway in the center that rivaled any grand stairway she had seen in Detroit or even Washington D.C.

A secretary around Mary's age sat at an oversized modern metal desk in a fashionable and fitted dress with large green and pink flowers. It seemed unseasonable to Mary, who was still adjusting to the tropical climate. She knew she could forget the entire concept of seasons as she knew it. March in Iowa was nothing but snow and wind. The woman wore a simple but elegant diamond ring on her hand. Were all the female secretaries here just bored wives without children to attend to? Or were they wives to lower-level administrators who couldn't refuse offering up their pretty wives as female secretaries, which were proper decorum in grand European offices, even ones located in the African rainforest surrounded by fragrant teak trees and wild bonobo.

Mary waited twenty-five minutes for Mr. Smet, who was referred to Meneer. Fewer people spoke Flemish than she had initially imagined, though why it mattered whether they spoke French or Flemish was irrelevant as she spoke neither. However, it seemed that Mr. Smet preferred Flemish, and so was Meneer Smet. She was relieved that the

promise of the English language was kept, most people she met so far could understand most of what she said. The ones who clearly didn't understand English still smiled and nodded politely.

Mr. Smet waited five more minutes until precisely nine o'clock, when he rang his secretary to show Mary into his office. His English accent sounded German, which rattled her. He mentioned he was from east Belgium, a town called Eupen, but hadn't visited Belgium in over a decade as he despised travel and no longer communicated with his family there. Mary took that as a brash confession of guilt—family members involved with the Reich. Of course, it could have been as simple as a family spat, but her parents' warnings rang in her ears.

His outfit was odd to her. She wasn't sure if it was how European men dressed now, but somehow, she doubted it. He was wearing plain white socks up to his knees, a pair of khaki shorts and a short-sleeve, white collared shirt that displayed his round belly and coffee stains. A jacket would have helped diminish it, however he didn't appear to mind. It was a wildly casual look in contrast to the dark wood and overstuffed bookshelves of his office.

"Missen Mary, welcome to *Institut.* All are anticipating your arrival, many of whom you will meet shortly. I hope your accommodations and servant woman are to your satisfaction. We have taken the utmost care and expense to make *Institut* suitable to European, in your case American, employees and their families," he said. He gave a weak smile as if to excuse her lack of family and place of birth.

"Please do inform my secretary when at times you find life unsuitable. This will happen on occasion. Never approach wild game. Crocodile and hippopotamus are especially dangerous. If one is located in or near your home, leave immediately. Insects

and rodents are plentiful here, and your home will at times require insectefuge. Rain is plentiful in rainforest living, therefore roofing and flooring may need to be repaired or replaced. I, by way of my secretary, Madame Janssens, am your direct liaison in these matters. Contact any time, day or night. We will dispatch the required assistance." He concluded, finally taking a breath. He had delivered the entire orientation in one long, memorized outburst.

"Thank you very much. My expectations have been met," was all Mary could think to say. Nothing could make life in the Belgian Congo seem more frightening than her mother's fantastical yarns of blood-thirsty boas and malaria-wielding mosquitos. At no mention of cannibals, Mary felt like a leaky roof was manageable.

"Fine. Fine. Bien. Goed," he nodded with every word. "Now, I will inform you of your post and requirements. The children will be delighted to have such an organized Missen with real-life practice in farming, nonetheless."

Mary furrowed her brow. "The children?" she asked, frowning.

"Indeed, there are around forty European children with regular attendance, and several hundred natives who enter and disperse more or less casually, as you say."

"Why, I'm sorry, there must be a mistake. I am Mary Elkhorn, brought here for administration and oversight. I spoke with the director himself. I am to be overseeing native farmers and working to increase production levels, something I did for the Farm and Garden Association before I came here."

"Yes, that's right. We teach all the native children to farm, as well as read and write. The European children also find it fascinating. All very charming. You will not be teaching them directly, of course, unless you find it absolutely necessary. Directing this

many women and children requires oversight and planning. There are missionaries, half-a-dozen wives and many natives who can manage the children in the classrooms."

Mary sat silent, dismayed. She was barely able to comprehend what she heard. She was here to organize an army of children laborers? Mr. Smet was unable to overlook the level of confusion plain on her face.

"Is all in order, Missen Elkhorn?"

She sighed deeply. "I'm going to need to speak with the director. I was under the impression I was hired to oversee farm laborers, that is, full-grown laborers." He misread her apprehension and chuckled.

"The children are not laborers, Missen. No, nothing of the sort. It is for play, for planting seeds and learning proper care of farmland. Why, perhaps you could spend some time working on a decent farming curriculum."

"For play?" she groaned. Not only was she overseeing children, it was irrelevant to overall production in any meaningful way. Mary had no experience with children. While her friends spent their summer days babysitting to save money for new dresses and shoes, Mary worked with her father in the fields, learning to change the oil in the farm truck, balancing on a high ladder scraping old paint off the barn, dusting sprawling tiger lilies with chipped red paint twenty feet below her.

"I must speak with the director, immediately."

"That is not possible, I'm afraid," he said with little regret in his tone. "He left just last week for Belgium. It was a dangerous but necessary trip, and we are not sure the date of his return."

"I do beg your pardon, Mr. Smet, but—"

“Please, call me Tuur,” he interjected, as if to slow the pace of her quickening anger. “Missen Mary, I am requisite to note your surprise at the news of your post. I am here to calm your fears. Raising the native youth with a basic understanding of European, or perhaps, American farming principles enhances the life of everyone here in C*ongo Belge*. It is the most important work that we do here. You were chosen carefully, as a woman fit to oversee children, as well as a practiced farmer—"

“Educated agronomist,” she interjected, hotly. The confusion ebbed, and ire took its place. Her options were limited. She already traveled all this way, left her life in Iowa. Could she demand a different position? A new post? Why had she traveled eight thousand miles to organize missionaries who teach children to play at farming in dry, mealy dirt? She might have stayed home and done the same thing, with far less disquiet on her parents’ part, and far superior rich, black soil.

“Missen,” he said firmly and laid both hands flat on his desk, “I have the highest hopes that this post will meet your expectations, just as the rest of Yangambi has succeeded in doing. As government scientists are excluded from regular wartime activity, you can imagine that any open administrative posts have been filled by now. When the director received your information, and after he spoke with you, he took stock of our situation here at *Institut* and found this alluring post, which you were notably qualified to fill. I ask that you meet with Sister Manon at the school house as soon as possible. My next meeting is now waiting. That is all.”

Fourteen

"No," was all she could think to say.

"Pardon me?" he asked, frowning.

"No," Mary said, "I did not come here to be a school teacher. The position I came for was laboratory administration, it's on my forms; it's the only job I will accept."

"Missen, you *are* administrating, at the school house," he said, standing awkwardly near her chair, his arms still wide in a gesture meant to escort her out of the office.

"I need a position with the farmers, the adult farmers, in the science wing. I have the credentials. I have no teaching experience. I simply cannot work in the school house. Please, Tuur," she said, using his first name with emphasis, "Contact the director and clear this up."

"This is the only position we have for you, Missen. I can assure you of that."

"Then I must return home," she said, watching his face closely.

He sighed. "There is a war on. It would be," he paused to look at her, "highly irregular of you to travel all this way only to return immediately. As you are aware, men are excused from service to work in the laboratories. So naturally, they have since become stuffed full of scientists. However, I will attempt to contact the director as soon as possible to clear this up. For the time being, you are posted to the school house. Can we agree on this arrangement?"

Mary marched angrily home, barely noticing her surroundings. Brand new brick buildings all erected in the last decade. The entire complex mimicking something like a university, deep in the African jungle, funded by Belgians through Congolese exports--all those diamonds, ivory and the other resources mentioned in the small Army field guide.

A functioning city full of scientists and educators founded on the concept of agronomy. It should be her dream.

Relieved Liombi was nowhere to be found, she sat on her bed, determined to grasp the situation and find a reasonable solution. What were her options?

She heard thunder crack loudly, just above her. She laid back on the bed and closed the mosquito net around her. Could she return to the United States? That would doubtlessly please her parents. Maybe the director would find her a position, the job she believed she was hired for.

Even in her current defeat, she knew she was capable of filling administrative positions in any number of colonial outposts on the continent. There were options. Outside her bedroom, the rain began to fall—heavy, wild. She could head back to Dakar, tell Daniel Miller the deal was off. See if she could work as a secretary or operator in their office there on the port. Yet, at least with the children she was still outside, in the fields. What good was her education, all her experience, in a crowded typing pool or on an operator board?

With that thought, she drifted into an accidental, fitful sleep—exhausted from weeks of travel, from journeying so far only to meet a familiar struggle. The one struggle she was desperately seeking to leave behind. A working woman—a paradox. She dreamt she was swimming in the Congo River, opaque brown with mud, half a mile wide and endless in length. She dreamt of charging hippopotamus and slithering boas, swimming without gain as the river pushed her farther and farther downstream, unable to move forward in all her effort.

Fifteen

The Europeans in West Africa are like the Englishmen and Frenchmen you might meet anywhere. Some of their customs are different from ours but not radically so. You will find, perhaps, that the English don't go about their work with our usual hustle and bustle. -Pocket Guide to West Africa.

She needed Bert; he could help. He would talk to the director and get things sorted. She woke up in the early hours of the morning after sleeping through the day and into the night. The travel, the time change, the disappointment, it all caught up to her. She saw that Liombi must have dropped off dinner that evening. Cold chicken, hard-boiled eggs, a thick slice of bread. Mary picked at her food in the growing orange light of sunrise while she worked out her plan. She had been both exhausted and excited upon her arrival and had been so focused on meeting Mr. Smet, that she had nearly forgotten Bert was even here waiting for her. She sat impatiently in her new house, resisting a fierce urge to unpack her wrinkled clothes and other belongings. As much as she was ready to settle in, she wasn't ready to give in. If she couldn't get the position in the laboratories or in the labor administration department, she was committed to leaving the institute before the weather turned and rain made the road impassable.

At 8:00 in the morning she left her small brick home, taking a minute to look around. She noticed the kola nut tree that Tata pointed out with its long leathery leaves, the trimmed lawn, the edge of the forest a hundred yards in the distance. She set off down a dirt path that led away from the tree line, a natural boundary. She had to ask several people where Dr. Thompson's laboratory was located. Each asked, "The American?" as if that's how everyone identified him.

All the buildings were brown brick and randomly interspersed along mud paths. She found the building where Bert's laboratory was located after passing it twice. She was beginning to sweat under her ivory-colored cotton blouse, only the sleeve slightly stained by the crushed berries.

Mary's hair was the color of a field mouse, a flat shade on the cusp of both blonde and brown. The tropical sun warmed her face and she regretted wearing her hair down, somewhat flattened curls ruffled from the day before were now damp with sweat. She pulled the huge metal door to the lab open. The inside of the building was cool and dark, and her eyes were shocked by the change in light. The building's hallways split into three directions, one to the left, one to the right and one straight ahead. She marched forward, determined to search the whole building until she found Bert. She was also curious to get a look at the equipment and the scientists within.

The floors were waxed and reflected the low hanging hallway lights. The further she moved into the building, the colder it was. She was chilled and rubbing her arms by the time she came to the end of the hallway. All of the doors were shut; she spotted no one. She wasn't sure if the workday had not yet begun or if the building was only partly in use. The light at the end of the hallway blinked off sporadically. She took a left at the end of the hall and got a sense for the shape of the building. Two rectangles connected by a central hallway and then edged by outer hallways, all the laboratories and offices on the inside. They would all be windowless, she noted.

She turned left and nearly ran into a man in a lab coat turning around the corner. He was tall and thin with pale skin—no surprise considering he likely worked inside a windowless office. His face was a few days unshaven with round, brown eyes framed by

a few crow's feet. He seemed to be perhaps ten years older than her, somewhere in his late thirties. He scrunched his face and frowned at her.

"Are you lost?" he asked, irritated.

"Not quite," she retorted. "I'm looking for Bert."

"No "Bert" works here. You need clearance to be in this building. Where are your tags?"

"Tags?" she asked. "I wasn't given any tags."

"Your credentials," he said, holding up his identification tag, growing more and more irritated with her. "You need to exit this building. We don't allow wives to wander through the laboratories tinkering with our experiments. I don't care who your husband is."

Her face was red now and her voice an octave higher than usual. "I just moved here. I haven't received any tags. I'm looking for my friend, Dr. Robert Thompson."

The man stopped sorting through the papers he was holding in his hands and looked up. "Mary?" he asked. "Oh, Mary from Iowa. I've heard all about you. Sorry about all that, you know how it is, no security around here except for me." His British accent, the tone now friendly, bounced up and down the empty waxed hallway.

Mary wasn't sure how to respond to that change in attitude but was suspicious of this man in his white lab coat, the "Dr." listed before his name. Another man working to keep her out of the laboratories. But she agreed to follow him as he led her to Bert's office. He turned back down the hallway Mary had just walked down and stopped at a nondescript brown wooden door in the center of the hallway. He pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the door. The office smelled strongly of soil, a warm, earthy scent. It was lit by the same dim lights that hung in the hallway. It was packed full of beakers, jars,

flasks, cannulas and burettes all organized neatly on wooden shelves. The room felt full of them, completely packed with shelf upon shelf of glassware.

There in the corner was Bert with his back to her. A feeling of relief rushed over her. He would get her in the laboratory, get her a white coat, an identification badge. Though it might never read “Dr.,” she did have a college degree, she did have the experience. Bert would be the one to set it right.

Sixteen

He seemed so startled to hear Mary's voice that he nearly dropped the beaker he was holding, but he turned around with a wide smile on his face. His gray hair was frazzled, as usual, and he was also a few days unshaven. He walked towards her with his hands out. He took her own into his and shook rapidly, offering her welcome to *Congo Belge*. His assistant smiled at his rough attempt at a French pronunciation. Mary ignored him and smiled at Bert.

She relayed her trip to him. She mentioned Puerto Rico, Brazil, a mix-up that brought her to Dakar. She left out Daniel Miller and the Foreign Service, of course. She would tell him about that later, when they were alone. Both men listened as she complained about Tuur Smet and her position in the schoolhouse. The other man began to slowly drift away during this story, sensing her growing frustration in her situation at the institute. Whether he didn't care to listen or didn't want to embarrass her in her righteousness, she wasn't sure. Bert noticed the man drifting away and called him over.

"Davey! By god, I forgot to introduce the two of you! Mary, this is Dave Briar. He's out of London."

"David. And it's Brighton," he said, correcting Bert.

"Right, right. London or somewhere near it. I've visited London before, many years ago. Did I tell you that, Dave?"

"Yes, you did," David responded, smiling politely. "Nice to meet you, Mary." He stood there awkwardly for a moment looking back and forth between Bert and Mary. The large laboratory was still and silent. "Well, I'm back to work. I'll let you two have a chat."

Bert rubbed his cheeks with one hand, cupping his face. “Razors haven’t come in ages. We were all using what we had, but mine got so dull I got horrid razor burn. Had to give it up last Thursday. Hoping some will show up soon.”

“Well, there is a war on. I suppose a farming institute in the middle of the jungle might not be the top priority.” Mary smiled, shrugging.

“Right, right, I suppose that’s true.”

“So, what do you think, Bert? Could you come with me to Tuur’s office? Let him know what we discussed, the permission you got from the director?”

He puffed his cheeks and pushed out the air slowly. He then scratched his short beard as if it irritated him. “I don’t know about that.” He spoke slowly as if he was thinking out loud. “I don’t know about that. The thing is, maybe I never discussed what kind of job you would do once you got here. I did assume you would be in the lab here with us. But we never really did discuss it out right. And they brought in another team on the soybeans to work with us, things are moving quite slow. This place has gotten crowded since the war started, you know.”

“You—what? You never discussed what my job would be? Did you tell them I worked with you at the University? That I have a degree?”

“Well sure, Mary. I’m sure that’s why they brought you over to work with the kids, now that I think of it. All the men here are academics; they’re professionals.”

“I’m—" She was speechless. Her mouth formed words but nothing she could think to say seemed to be right.

“I think you’ll do just fine at the school house. And now that you’ve met Dave, you’re welcome to visit the lab. You can come work with us during your time off. Why,

we'd love that, wouldn't we, Davey? I could sure use your help on this." He gestured around the lab.

David kept his eyes on his work. He was examining seeds under a microscope. Without looking up, he responded, "Sure, Robert."

"Yes, we'd like that." He smiled at her.

She shook her head. "Bert," she responded, "I didn't come here to work with children. I can't stay here and work in a school house. All my experience is in hybridization and maximum output, in soybeans. I've been studying the soil of the river basin, the manure of the wild animals. I've been learning French."

"Oh, good. Good. The French will help in the school house. David and I both speak English, as you well know." He trailed off. "I expect to see you in here on your time off, Miss Elkhorn. Davey and I better get back to work now. This other team is quite aggressive. I look forward to seeing you in here on your time off. We'd sure like that. I know Dave would." He winked at her.

She was horrified. Her face contorted but before she could respond, he turned around and began organizing his work space. He moved a beaker from here to there, stacked a pile of books and began taking notes in an open note pad. Mary stood behind him, never more unsure of herself, never more unsure of what to do or where to go.

She heard a sound behind her. She turned abruptly and nearly ran into David for the second time that day. He had cleared his throat in a polite attempt to get her attention.

"Let me walk you out," he said.

She looked at him angrily; her eyes narrowed. "No," she said, too loud. "I'll find my own way."

Seventeen

Remember that the African is in his own country, on his own land, and that you are a guest and must conduct yourself accordingly. -Pocket Guide To West Africa

She was hopelessly lost. She wandered past each house looking for her kola nut tree until she realized nearly every house had one planted out front. She would have laughed if the knot in her throat wasn't burning, tears threatening to fall. She never cried much, not even as a child. She tried to remember the last time she had but couldn't recall. But now her throat was caught and the painful bulk of it grew, making it hard for her to swallow.

She wandered down near the river. It had no bank. Reeds grew from the edge of the path all the way into the river's wide flow, and there was no way to see exactly where the reeds ended and the river began. Not that she would ever approach the bank, not with the threat of crocodiles, hippopotamus, snakes, other creatures she'd never heard of before. She imagined the orderly, green-lit fields of Iowa, the warm summer breeze and the distant-feeling sun. The memory felt sterile to her compared to the heavy, pulsing weight of the forest and river surrounding her. The life of the place buzzed around her. The river moved; the insects swarmed; the air pushed on her skin reminding her of its heat. She turned her back on the river.

A man in a three-piece suit was walking down the path carrying a tray of food. He was nearly a hundred years away, walking toward her with purpose. He stopped when he saw her and tilted his head a little to the side as if he was asking a question. She walked towards him hoping she could help him find her house. He stood waiting for her. She thought about how hot he must be in all those clothes. The Belgians' wardrobes were more suited to the tropical heat, but the two inlander men she'd seen at the Institute were

both wearing suits, hats and loafers. She found that odd, but there was a polite breach of contact between her and Tata and she didn't think to ask about his clothing. His answer would likely have had something to do with the glorious Belgian women and their perfectly coiffed hair.

The man lowered his eyes as she approached.

"Hello, I've just arrived here and seem to have become lost. I was wondering if you had any idea how I might identify my house."

He kept his eyes lowered and didn't respond right away.

She was exhausted, on the verge of tears, with drops of sweat running down her blouse. The sun was angry and incessant and required her to squint and shade her eyes.

"I'm sorry, do you speak English?" she asked, rather loudly, annunciating each word.

"Yes, I do," he said, quietly.

"I'm sorry. I'm quite a scene, I'm sure. Mary Elkhorn, just arrived from The United States." She reached out her right hand, but the man just stood there, head down. She glanced down at his wrist, where the suit cut perfectly at a stump. His right hand was missing. She gasped, not with shock, because there were veterans from the first war who came home missing arms and legs, but from embarrassment.

"No, don't apologize," he said. "I'm quite a scene, I'm sure." His accent was thick and syrupy, tinged with both French and native rhythms. Mary knew from her pocket guide that there were hundreds of tribal languages spanning across West Africa. She couldn't begin to guess what his first language might be, or how many languages he spoke. His tone cut and Mary was unsure how to respond, but he continued. "I am Malu,

Liombi's husband. She is ill today, so I brought you this meal. I went to your house and knocked but found it empty."

"Yes, I thought I could find my way back to it, but—" she trailed off. He had turned around without a word and was walking down the path toward the identical-looking homes. He followed the path westward until he came to a house. Without speaking, he handed Mary the plate of food. Something that looked like boiled sweet potatoes, a large piece of chicken and sliced bananas with large black seeds. She was curious to taste this new variety and stood examining the fruit. When she looked up, she saw that Malu had tied a handkerchief to the slim trunk of her kola nut tree.

"Now you will find your way." He nodded.

She wasn't sure what to make of this man. Tata had been deferential to the point of ingratiating. Liombi was kind, but quiet. Malu's eyes were sharp, and he kept them narrowed, furrowing his brow even while his head was lowered. He was tall and thin, with a tan suit and the same clear skin as Liombi, though she could see several scars on his face and hand.

She realized that she was frightened of him. Not necessarily now, in the blazing sun holding a plate of cold chicken, but afraid of that quiet anger she felt quaking underneath the fitted suit. His energy spate out in its obvious magnitude, seemingly harnessed by his intense and focused glare, eyes facing downward.

"Thank you for bringing me this food. I will thank Liombi for cooking it tomorrow. I would like to come to some arrangement so that I can cook my own meals soon," she said.

He shook his head slowly. "She cannot bring food tomorrow. The illness lasts for several days, two at least, each month. I will bring food those days."

"Okay, thank you," was all Mary could think to say. "I'm going to go on in, it's been a long morning," she said, walking toward her front door.

Eighteen

La vie est pleine de décisions difficiles.

Faites attention à la tâche à accomplir.

Un bon ami est difficile à trouver.

The day's first rays of sunlight spilled over the Congo River while Mary sat at her kitchen table. Refracted prisms burst in symmetry through the shutters over her face, her arms. She mindlessly rubbed one finger over the smooth lacquered wood. Decisions led down certain paths. She played each scenario in her mind's eye. She *could* leave here, but returning home felt impossible for many reasons—some nameless, some prideful. The travel alone swayed her, wearily, against leaving. It would take weeks, probably longer now that the rains started. She was tired of waiting to begin. Tired of searching for a navigable path. She came all this way to find something new. Her hands and all her inner-workings, they were charged, electrified, ready to begin.

She could look for positions elsewhere in Africa. But could she give up farming? The director would eventually return to Yangambi. She felt that if she could only speak with him, he would clear this up. She could organize the missionaries and children in a matter of hours per week, and in her spare time could work with Bert in the lab, focus on soybean hybridization, soil manipulation. She could do the real work and once they had a break through, they director would be forced to notice her contributions.

The clock ticked rhythmically, the only noise in the house. Mary watched the hands move, transfixed, until they clicked into the time that required action. 8am. She knew she had to choose.

She stood and took a deep breath. She would meet the Sister at the school house. She would start the work, *demeaning*, for which she was hired. Though she felt deceived, a contract was signed.

Mary knew that this was a scheme that she had devised—some liberation to find a place outside of bureaucracy back in the States. Though she awoke from that dream too early, she must see this through. She would bide her time waiting for the director, or the first opportunity, to get herself into the laboratory full time. They couldn't keep her out of there forever. Whoever *they* were, it didn't matter—Tuur Smet, the director, David in his lab coat, the soldiers after the war ended, her parents, her curled hair and curved hips.

Nineteen

At the schoolhouse she walked directly into her own nightmare. Rows of giggling children, dirty fingernails, flailing limbs from little boys who used every movement to expel surplus energy. Sister Manon bustled over in her black habit. An ample woman with a round face and pale blue eyes, all Mary could see of her under her garment beside vein-streaked, wrinkled hands.

Mary had walked down a loud hallway to find the Sister, classroom after classroom stuffed with wiggling bodies, segregated between native and colonial children. Three classrooms with Belgian children in shining shoes, five classrooms with native children, some wearing brightly-colored cloths tied together like Liombi's, some wearing religious garb, some in European style hand-me-downs. Most classes were attended by nuns, a few by English Baptist missionaries who traveled from Stanleyville with the promise of working generators and European produce. There was a handful of smartly dressed Belgian women who Mary presumed were either the mothers of these children or bored housewives with apparently nothing better to do than spend their days shushing rambunctious children.

Sister Manon responded to questions with pert, one-word answers and never spoke more than absolutely necessary. Mary didn't know whether that was her general veneer or merely behavior designated specifically for her. It became clear after a short and difficult conversation that the Sister wasn't pleased with her new supervisor in the young, supple shape of an American Lutheran with no teaching experience and ambiguous religious commitment.

"Madame Elkhorn—Mademoiselle, *escusez-moi*—I cannot begin to understand the desires of these men, Tuur and Louis." She mentioned the staffing administrator and

director pointedly, as if they were foolish adolescent students determined to cause trouble. “However, I am quite certain we are educating these impressionable minds ardently. They lack no structure or schedule. I concede that our farming techniques are merely those of old women who have spent lifetimes managing gardens. Be that as it may, I will allow you to oversee the children in this subject, that you may tutor them in the more advanced techniques of the American farmer.” She pursed her lips together and shifted her posture away from Mary and toward the children working quietly at raw wood tables.

Mary couldn’t control her frustration and sighed deeply, rolling back her neck and staring up at the exposed florescent lightbulbs. Her hands flexed while strings of words formed in her mind, many too indecent to articulate in the company of a nun, no matter how sinister that nun happened to be. She straightened her shoulders and looked down at the old woman sitting at her desk, who was determined to evade Mary’s gaze. She was, in effect, ignoring Mary altogether.

“Sister,” Mary said, too loudly. The children stopped their work and peered wide-eyed at the two women. “You seem to have forgotten that I am your superior. While I have no interest or intention to restructure the framework of this schoolhouse, I was hired to create and establish a farm-based curriculum for these students. This is, after all, the foremost agronomical institute on the entire continent of Africa, and the director finds it unsettling that these children are lacking any principled farming instruction,” she said, a bold lie, or perhaps in that moment decided for own sanity, that must why the director hired her. “I will be here Monday morning to see that his wishes are fulfilled, and these children are prepared to do the work that the institute holds in the highest regard.” Mary nodded her head firmly and looked at the Sister, awaiting her response. After a moment,

when it became clear the Sister would continue to ignore her, Mary turned sharply and left the classroom with a sarcastic "*Au Revior*" that sounded more like a growl than a goodbye.

Twenty

She stalked out of the room into a hallway filled with nuns, missionaries and Belgian women who were apparently drama-starved enough to bypass the typical European etiquette of eavesdropping without gawking. Mary had used all her fortitude arguing with the Sister. She put her head down and focused on the exit door, walking outside, straight-backed, into the oppressive humidity and looming black clouds. They hung heavy, nearly close enough for her to reach up and touch. Muted rays of sunlight filtered through the spot where the sun sat high in the noontime sky. Equatorial sun, never wholly retreating. She heard the door crack behind her and swung to face who she expected would be the irate, self-important nun wielding a wooden ruler, hell-fire Scripture, or God-knows-what in order to scold her.

A young woman faced her, grinning. Immaculate in a colorful floral dress cut below her knees and curled blonde hair bouncing as she beamed at Mary. “You are quite a wicked storm blowing through here today. Sister Manon is left speechless!” Bright-red lips smiled broadly, her English resonating with a French-tinged purr. Mary knew immediately that this was a familiar gesture to this woman—smiles that came easily and often. The prominent gap between her two front teeth added to her overall charm and transformed Mary’s anger into delirious humor. She hunched her shoulders, covered her face with her hands and laughed for the first time in days.

“Heavens, I made quite a scene, didn’t I?”

“We haven’t had that much excitement here since Sister Lucie found herself with child! I’m delighted!”

“Well, I’m glad I could do something worthwhile. I’m Mary Elkhorn, newly arrived from the United States.”

"Of course you are. We've all been expecting you, darling. I am Oceane Van Aller. My husband is here for special assignment. We are not permanently stationed but have unfortunately been shipwrecked here for many years. I'm tickled by your arrival. Desperate for it, to be sure! I do not want to see you worry yourself over Manon. A real bitch," she whispered and then winked, mischievous and playful.

Mary smiled. It felt good to have an ally, a friendly face. Pressure somewhere deep inside her chest eased. She breathed easily for the first time that day.

Twenty-One

Except for men in uniform you will see few white faces in West Africa. There are practically no white settlers and most of the white men are government officials, traders, or missionaries; there are few white women. -Pocket Guide To West Africa

The storm held off and she decided to spend what time she could wandering the grounds. Muddy paths led to numerous laboratories, buildings filled with small flats, an electrical warehouse that Mary presumed powered the entire Institute, small fields filled with rows of banana trees like the tidy rows of corn planted in Iowa. The farmers there would be planting soon, any week now. Some might have already planted, weighing the risk of a late frost in hopes of an early harvest. It was a strange way to see banana trees grow, so measured, instead of the aimless, wind-blown copses that grew naturally.

She walked past an open garage filled with cars and trucks of assorted makes and models from across the globe—halves of men, only greasy trousers showing, working diligently beneath them. All around the property uniformed Congolese men cut grass with machetes and scythes.

Mary came to a one-story building with a low-hanging, black-shingled roof, shaded darker by charcoal clouds. It was the end of the path. Beyond it, jungle. It was made of the same brick as her new home, fronted by a knee-high stone fence. A sign read:

INERA
HERBARIUM NATIONAL
DU CONGO
YANGAMBI

Mary stepped through an unassuming front door into a single, massive room filled with cerulean-colored metal cabinets, floor to ceiling. Rows and rows of small sliding doors, some pushed open, stacked with large brown envelopes. The outside walls, along

the four sides of the rectangular building, were filled with open shelves. Taxidermy bats the size of kites, perfectly proportioned hummingbirds smaller than figs, animal skulls propped at angles by protruding incisors. A building of wonders.

A young inlander wearing a *Force Publique* uniform sat at a desk resting his cheeks in his hands. She wondered who posted him there and why, the building seemed to be collecting dust. He nodded indifferently, as if she came through the door every day. She nodded back, and her feet carried her without direction, elated to find this sanctuary. She stopped in front of an open shelf and reached for an envelope. She glanced over at the man sitting at the desk, waiting to be rebuked. He continued sitting, staring out the window, disinterested in his seemingly dull post. From inside the envelope she pulled out a sheet of paper with three large, dried red pods fastened with clear string. The taxonomy form showed typewriter characters in a mix of English and French with requests for the date the specimen was found, the altitude and region of the country in which it was discovered, specific observations—other pertinent findings typed in unfamiliar French.

Some shelves held numerous books, bound and filled with similar pages, all containing a single dried plant and an informational card typed in the same mix of English and French. While she couldn't translate the French, the specimens alone captivated her attention. How many were there? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands?

She spent the afternoon this way, lost in the formaldehyde jars filled with threatening-looking millipedes, malevolent even in preserved death. Lost in the blank, glass eyes of taxidermy creatures and the crisped-brown papers, holding an astounding number of dehydrated sub-Saharan plants, none of which she had laid eyes on before.

Adrift in the Herbarium, she was finally roused by a tense conversation in a nearby row of shelving. She couldn't make any of what they said, hushed male voices speaking French, rising and falling in intense conversation. Mary realized she must have been wandering through the building for hours.

She turned toward the door to escape earshot as well as return home, when at the same time the two men turned the corner. They stood directly in front of her. She was confronted by a man whose skin was the color of a moonless night, in contrast to pink scars which covered his entire body. As if his skin had been peeled back, healed, then peeled yet again—visible skin spotted pink and nightfall. His face was distorted, his left eye seeming to melt into his cheek, a large bulbous protrusion attached to the right side of his chin. He looked directly into her eyes and nodded, pushing past her. The tiny veins of his eyes filled red with blood.

The man left standing in the aisle smiled casually. Mary couldn't help but twist and watch over her shoulder as the other man turned down the aisle and left her sight. She'd never witnessed affliction like that before, not from the men who returned from war—not burns, not shrapnel.

"Do not worry, my dear. Georg, a true gentleman, yet suffers bodily deficiencies linked to a burdensome but necessary career at Shinkolobwe." The man's explanation confused her further. His voice was deep and melodic like many who spoke French first and learned English later. Tinged with characteristic accents—suffers coming out like *zu-fferz*. She furrowed her brow and he chuckled dismissively. "Truly, Mademoiselle, no concern for you. He is a man better provided for than any *evolué*. His efforts assisting your own country in this war more imperative than any decorated general."

"My country?" she asked, bewildered.

"Why, yes. You must be Mademoiselle Elkhorn?" he said casually.

She sighed. Everyone was aware of her arrival. She was immediately recognizable as the unwed American farmer.

"Yes. It's true. I must be," she responded caustically. Mary's initiation to the institute was trying her patience. The mocking familiarity she met at every introduction frayed her nerves. She didn't find it amusing that she carried a target on her back.

He tilted his head to the side and exaggerated a frown. "*Non*, Mary. There are no secrets in Yangambi. Do not be sore. Let us escape this dusty mausoleum. Allow me to escort you home." Mary glanced at his identification badge. Another doctor—Dr. Thomas Devault. His position wasn't listed, only a security clearance. No laboratory or specific field of science like David's or the other scientists and administrators she'd come across.

Stepping through the door into an approaching dusk, clouds still gray and looming, she read his badge and said his name out loud, hoping to ask what his clearance signified. This caused a fit of laughter in which he doubled over dramatically, resting one hand on her shoulder. They were the same height and Mary was forced to lean into his gesture.

His demeanor was mixed with flirtatious taunting and unfounded familiarity. It dismayed Mary. After a few years spent with elderly farmers and women field hands, his European irreverence unsettled her. She glowered, smirking. When he stood up, blue eyes flashed brightly with mirth. Apparently, she mispronounced his name.

"Repeat after me: Toe-mah Dee-voh," he enunciated his name. She repeated it, and he made a pained face. "That will have to do, I suppose." *Zuppoze.* Thunder rolled in the distance and lighting zigzagged the sky several miles distant.

"I admit my French is very poor," she shrugged.

"*Oui, Mamemoiselle*, that is *trés vrai*." He grinned at her and she glared back. "However, do not fear. I was born in Africa, schooled on this continent, as well. I speak nearly every one of the multitudes of languages coming from the mouths of our stranded inhabitants. I make an excellent translator and guide." He took a slight bow. His behavior didn't seem to match his age, somewhere near Mary's, perhaps a few years older. He alternated from behaving like an arrogant teenager to a genius polyglot, a doctor of one sort or another.

Weighted rain drops began to fall, fat on the tops of their heads—the ozone dizzying—fresh and electric. Mary started walking faster and Thomas handed her a tightly wrapped umbrella from somewhere inside his lab coat. "My first piece of advice--invest in many of these. When you don't have one, look for the biggest leaf you can find."

The rain poured in horizontal sheets by the time they arrived at Mary's house. David Briar, Liombi, and her husband Malu stood on her covered porch, backs against the wall to avoid the rain as best they could. Her shoes and slacks were covered, caked with mud. She held the umbrella directly in front of her face to keep the rain from stinging her eyes while Thomas walked behind her. Here she was in the heart of Africa, hurrying home during a tropical monsoon. Things were still settling inside of her. Could this be her new life? Her emotions, the newness, the thick mud, it overwhelmed her. She laughed out loud.

She turned around to Thomas, still smiling. He glared past her, around the umbrella to the small group watching from the porch. "Would you come in and join us until the rain stops?" she asked. He yelled something into the downpour. She didn't hear and shook her head in misunderstanding. He gripped her waist and pulled her close.

"I promise to see you soon. Please, keep the umbrella," he yelled into her ear, his mouth a breath away from her cheek, which flushed. He turned and ran back into the storm from the direction they had come.

Twenty-Two

She approached the porch excitedly. Oceane, the herbarium, Thomas, the rain, it changed the course of her day, which had begun quite desperately. Had she come home after meeting with Manon, she might have wept. But a turn was taken, and she saw excitement and potential in her future. When she reached the front porch, she pushed open the door and ushered everyone inside.

"And where have you been?" David asked immediately.

"What?" was all Mary could think to say.

"We have been waiting here in the rain expecting for someone to come tell us you had drowned in the river!"

Mary stopped and looked at the three of them. "What on earth do you mean?" she asked.

Liombi touched David's arm gently. "Malu came to bring you food but you were not here. He asked someone on the path, and they told him about Sister Manon. He saw David returning home for a meal and asked him if he had seen you. No one had since the schoolhouse, so we grew worried. You see, there are dangers here."

"Thomas Devault among the least of them!" David said, too loudly.

Mary was becoming irritated with them. She understood perfectly the dangers here, her parents had made sure of that. They were treating her like a child late for curfew. The pounding of the rain on her roof heightened the moment. It was dark and loud inside the house. Before she could say anything, Malu interjected, changing the subject.

"Liombi made you American food."

"Yes," Liombi said, smiling to lighten the mood, "I made enough for everyone. Let's eat. No one has eaten yet."

"I wish you wouldn't worry. I'm perfectly safe here. I will stay away from the river and can handle a wayward scientist or two." She scoffed, but no one said anything. Liombi turned to prepare the food. David looked briefly at Malu, but Mary couldn't interpret the exchange. They seemed an unlikely pair, the frumpy Brit and serious inlander.

"Yes, well, we all look out for each other here. Or some of us do, anyway. Besides the animals, the river, the sunburn, there is a war on. Malu told me you had been lost yesterday, another reason we were worried. You found a guide--Devault," he exaggerated the French pronunciation, "but be cautious. I'll tell you this, I've questioned his alliances." He said the last sentence quietly, raising his eyebrows as if he was insinuating something.

Mary had nearly forgot she was there as some kind of American spy. Though she had only just arrived and couldn't trust David any more than she could Thomas, she was reminded of Daniel Miller and the mysterious man in Dakar. She was told only to observe and report. Perhaps at the end of April she would write a letter to Daniel, if she saw anything suspicious. So far, she had only met an angry nun and a young, arrogant Belgian who was mistrusted by another young, arrogant Brit. Hardly worth the paper.

Twenty-Three

J'ai des secrets à moi.

Méfiez-vous des créatures toxiques.

Merci pour le repas chaud.

Mary went to her bedroom to dry off and change clothes while Liombi set a table. She hadn't necessarily invited them over for dinner. But here they were, and it was storming fiercely outside; she could hardly ask them to leave. Besides, it *would* be nice to have company. She brushed her hair with her fingers and let it drip onto her dress, which she covered with a knit sweater. She hardly thought she would need to bring one, but she was glad she did. The rain brought a chill to her skin, despite the humidity.

The others were sitting around her dinner table, waiting for her. David rose and pulled out her chair. He stood awkwardly for a moment beside her. His full height was only a couple inches above hers, but now that she was seated, she would have looked directly into his groin had she turned. He sighed and stood for another moment before he fumbled back to his seat. His face remained unshaven since she met him the day before and his hair was matted from the rain. Still, he wasn't bad looking. Round brown eyes, and though he had now been cross with her twice in as many days, he seemed harmless to her, possibly even caring.

"I mean no disrespect toward your capacity to care for yourself, only a neighborly responsibility for your safety. A camaraderie—man, or woman I suppose, together against nature. That's how it is here. I can't reiterate plainly enough—this landscape is a dangerous one. London, and your Iowa, pale in comparison. As it is, Yangambi is held together by secrets. They are the backbone of the Institute, if you will." Mary's confused face caused David to stop short.

"It's only that Thomas Devault just informed me that there are no secrets in Yangambi."

The three of them were silent for a moment, refusing to respond. Eventually, David shrugged and gave her a polite smile. "Just watch yourself. This is Africa, after all."

Malu tensed at this. Before he could say anything in response, Liombi stood up and swatted David's hand from the bowl of ground meat he was reaching for.

"I serve," she said. "Here we have two *Blancs* who want to serve themselves." She raised her eyebrows. "We'll have *Force Publique* after us."

Malu looked at her sternly, but David laughed. "I think they have bigger problems on their hands, what with a war on."

"No, David. The Force is already watching Malu. We are very careful."

"That's enough," Malu scolded quietly. "That's enough." He stood up and excused himself from the table. He looked at Liombi and said something in a language Mary couldn't understand. Liombi nodded without responding. Malu's eyes swept the table as a way to excuse himself. He left, his chair pushed away from the table for the rest of the meal.

Mary and David watched the scene silently. Though she was sitting at her dining table, she felt as if she was intruding.

David leaned over and whispered, "I apologize, Mary. Liombi and Malu have been caring for me devoutly for years now. Surely, I would not have survived here without them. True, the man's got quite a temper when it comes to certain matters; I'm quite sure I don't understand. And trust me when I say that things are not what they seem here. Keep your eyes open."

Isn't that what Daniel and the nameless man at the Foreign Service office had told her? If the local police force was watching Malu, and possibly David too, should she be watching them as well? She would keep her eyes open, all right. But while Malu seemed tense and possibly dangerous, David seemed mild-mannered, *quite boring*, even.

David interrupted her thoughts. "Mary, tell us about Iowa. All I can get from Robert is the view from his old laboratory at his university. I'm not sure he ever left it, the way he talks."

The mood changed so quickly that Mary was flustered. She thought about Ames, about Bert's old office, all her old friends and the dormitory where they had lived. Then her thoughts drifted to the farm, her parents, the home she left behind.

"It feels so far away from here, like an entirely different planet. The air is so--," she paused, looking for the right word, "distant. Nothing like here, pressing in on you. The land is flat, and you can look around and see for miles and miles in each direction. Tiger lilies grew on the north side of our barn, the farm where I grew up, a whole great row of them. Have either of you ever seen one? They bloom a spotted orange in the spring; their pollen stains your skin." It was like a dream she was describing. Images and scenes floating up from below the surface. She smiled at them. "Quite lovely, in its own way."

"Ah, yes. Brighton, too, is quite lovely. Right on the sea."

The two of them talked a little longer about where they had come from, who lived there, who they left behind. This they had in common—parents, school friends, no lovers, no great attachments. Liombi listened quietly, eating her dinner until the conversation shifted to the Congo. David did his best to give Mary details about what to expect during the rainy season, how to stay safe from wild animals, run-ins he had encountered, until Liombi held up her hands. David stopped and looked at her, raising his eyebrows.

"Mary," she said. "You seem like a very nice woman. So, I will tell you the truth about the Congo. If you listen to David, he will get you killed."

Liombi laughed and patted David's arm. He pretended offense but spread his hands as if he was offering Liombi the table.

"If Malu were here, he would tell you this. Here is a vast institute inside a landscape so full of bush animals, angry hippopotamus, biting insects, sure. Also, there are thousands of European men and women. Two Americans, maybe a few more," she said, shrugging. "And those thousands, perhaps they are most dangerous thing here." She smirked. "But you must also watch out for the snakes."

Now David laughed outright. The light was dim inside the house, no lamps were lit. The sky was a dull gray, but the rain was light now and the house was quiet. They both seemed to be looking at Mary, but she wasn't sure what kind of response they were expecting.

She took a bite of the potatoes, full of salt, melted butter. How Liombi came upon those items in such abundance during a war, she couldn't imagine. All their talk about the dangers of the Belgians confused her, yet her parents had insinuated the same. She still couldn't believe a country invaded would be sympathetic to their captors. So, she looked at both of them and chose to take a safe path. She was commissioned by the US government, after all, and she must be careful.

"Well, then it's a good thing I have the three of you watching out for me—Malu included."

Liombi smiled, and David winked. She smirked back at them. They ate the rest of their meal in relative peace. David and Liombi told her stories of life in *Congo Belge*. At first, she listened carefully for hints of subterfuge, but the conversation was harmless—

stories from childhood, stories of confrontations with wild creatures, crocs and angry orangutans. She began to get comfortable in their presence, lulled by the sound of the rain hitting the roof. She told them more of Iowa, of her time spent with Bert at university. She told them of the cold Iowa sun, the loamy black soil, snowy twilights dissolving the horizon, her mother's acre-wide strawberry patch, she again mentioned the tiger lilies tipping pregnant with pollen, maybe the most exotic thing about Iowa—their distinct and overwhelming perfume an elixir.

The rest of the day's confusion and anger began to slip away. Something new took its place. But there was still work to do.

Twenty-Four

Don't take a chance. That's the soundest rule you can follow in West Africa. - Pocket Guide to West Africa.

Wooden steps led down to the river. Five steps, the second from the top missing. Just a small embankment a few hundred yards from the path with a spot clear of reeds. The air was stifling, and there was no breeze. It would feel good to go for a swim. She saw the natives swim in the river every day while they laughed and smiled and used baskets to catch fish.

She stepped down toward the cool, brown water of the Congo River. It was still early, near sunrise, and the morning sun was shrouded behind low clouds. Pale blue and white sunlight reflected off the water back into itself, a blinding spot in the sky just above the river line. A swim would feel good, just a dip in the cool water. The current was slow in the tiny inlet created by the embankment. But the final step groaned under her weight, rotten from years of use. She splashed into the water, the step disintegrating below her.

She realized that the water was deep here; she couldn't feel the bottom. She reached her toe down into the river like a ballerina pointing feet, but felt no earth, no muck. The current, which looked peaceful from shore, immediately began to carry her downstream, far from the safety of the wooden steps. She tried to swim against it, reaching for the lowest step as an anchor, but the current was too strong. She was being pushed into the great bulk of the river, the center of the current. She yelled for help, watching buildings pass as she was pushed down stream. She looked around frantically for one of the dug-out canoes the natives fished in, for anyone on shore who could help. She screamed now, panicking.

She heard her name, faintly. She heard someone call her name from the shore. She tread the water desperately, turning in every direction to find help, but it fought her down and under.

“Mary!” she heard.

But there was nothing she could do. She saw no one on shore. There were no workers leaving their night shift posts, there were no fishermen up early for the morning’s catch. There was not a soul in sight. She began to cry and yell desperately.

“Mary!” the voice shouted again.

She felt warmth on her skin; her shoulders felt the warmth of the sun. The river began to slow. “Mary!” she heard, closer now. She looked around frantically. And slowly, very slowly, she felt the perspiration on her skin. She felt the sunlight fade. She felt hands on her.

The dream had felt more real than her memories. More real than the fresh memory of yesterday. She woke to find Madame Janssens, Mr. Smet’s secretary, and a nun in full habit in her bedroom.

“What is going on? What are you doing in my house?” Mary asked, alarmed.

Madame Janssens was clearly embarrassed to be standing over Mary’s bed, her hands still on her shoulders. The nun, however, scowled at Mary.

“We did not want to be here,” she told her, “but you have missed your first morning of work. Sister Manon sent me to fetch you. When you didn’t respond, I summoned Alice for your house keys. We heard you cry out, so we entered and found you asleep.”

“I was dreaming,” Mary murmured, but the dream was already escaping her.

“Yes, well good for you,” the nun said in broken English. “Now it’s time for you to go to work.”

Twenty-Five

Je ne suis pas enseignant.

Les enfants sont dangereux.

C'est le travail que je suis venu faire.

The sister waited, angry and hunched, on Mary's front porch. Who wouldn't be angry wearing a floor-length black habit in a rainforest on the equator? Mary wondered if that's why Manon was sour, simply and unbearably sweating down her breasts all day long. She dressed quickly and pulled her hair back. She wiped the sweat off her own face with a cool washcloth, but immediately began to perspire again. The weight of the air was a presence; it hounded her every step.

The sister guided her to the schoolhouse and Mary attempted to commit the route to memory. Black clouds hung low and raindrops began to plop here and there. The sister pulled out an umbrella and walked ahead of Mary. The rain began to fall harder, and the sister stopped so that Mary nearly ran into her backside.

"No reason you show up late and wet like a dog." She linked her arm to Mary's. Mary stood stiff for a moment. "Come along now or Sister Manon will be angry with both of us."

The nun was right, Manon was angry at them both. It must have taken nearly an hour, maybe longer, to get Mary to the schoolhouse. Mary would have been ashamed of being late if Manon wasn't so righteous. Also, the dream stuck with her like some kind of trauma, a looming fear, though the details faded nearly as soon as she woke up.

So, she argued that they had never agreed on a time, and that she was extremely jet lagged. She needed a few days to adjust in a healthy manner. The nun glared at her, clucked her tongue and stalked away.

She left Mary standing alone in a long hallway of the schoolhouse. Once she walked away, Mary realized she had no idea what she was doing there. She looked around for someone to ask, someone to talk to, but the classroom doors were shut and busy within. Mary turned in a full circle in the hallway. She was hoping to find Sister Ida who had walked her to the schoolhouse. Maybe she would see Oceane, the kind woman she had met the day before.

She slowly began to walk the hallway, peeking into classrooms. She decided if she was confronted, she could pretend to be observing as a means of inspecting the schoolhouse. She glanced into the window of a classroom brimming with Congolese children. They sat still and upright in their seats. Mary noticed one boy in the corner with pink scars lacing his hands and arms, a few of the worst spots raised in boils. Her heart began to pound as she watched the child, imagining the pain of the burns, how he received them.

"Mary Elkhorn," Manon said sternly from down the hallway. Never before in any memories from childhood did Mary remember wishing to turn invisible. Now, for the first time in her life at the age of twenty-nine, she dreamed of having that power. She wished she could vanish from the Sister's sight and scurry off to some corner of the schoolhouse. She shook the thought from her head and turned around to face the sister. "We have work to do."

"Yes, we do," said Mary.

Twenty-Six

Inquiry saves a man from making mistakes.

-African Proverb

Manon's office was small and nearly empty. There was a large wooden desk with a roll top lid that could be closed and locked. The only ornament on the walls were a Maltese Cross and framed picture of Jesus holding up two fingers in blessing. Manon's accent sounded very British to Mary. She could barely perceive hints of French or Flemish. She knew Manon was Belgian but wasn't sure why her accent was so Anglicized.

"Well then, tell me your plan."

"I, well—what do you mean?" Mary was wracking her brain for a plan that very moment. She had no clue what children needed to learn and no experience teaching them.

"I mean, what is your plan for the farming curriculum?"

Mary considered a few options. She could tell Manon that she needed to gauge the situation of the schoolhouse and judge accordingly, which would be a bluff, as she wasn't sure if she *could* judge accordingly. She did a difficult thing, something that Mary did not often do in her life.

She admitted her ignorance.

"I don't know," she said, sighing. "I came here believing I would work in the laboratories with my mentor, Dr. Thompson. I planned on working as an administrator in his lab in order to assist his research. I am quite good at those things, though Mr. Smet seems to believe I'm better suited for the schoolhouse." Mary expected a scowl, a scoff of disapproval, but Manon only nodded.

“I see,” was all she said. “Take the rest of the week to watch the children in their classes. Walk through our gardens and see the children at play. You grew up on a farm, I believe?”

Mary nodded.

“Then you know what children need to learn about farming because you have done just that, correct?”

“I suppose so,” Mary agreed hesitantly.

With that, Manon pulled a small set of keys from a pocket of her habit and unlocked her desk lid. It rolled up loudly. She took out a stack of papers, found a pen and began writing. Mary sat, unsure of what to do. It struck her as odd that a nun in a schoolhouse would keep her files locked up. Manon’s hand froze on the page. She raised her eyes to Mary’s face. “All right. Go now.”

So, Mary did what the Sister ordered. She spent the rest of the day observing quietly, until three o’clock when the bell rang, and the children ran to meet their mothers or their nannies there to pick them up from school. The children in the garden were the most exciting to watch as they plunged their hands in the soil without regard. They removed their shoes and worked the soil with their toes. They planted and unplanted large seeds of soybeans and corn. It kept her occupied until she heard the school bell ring. And that’s when Mary headed west, toward Bert and David’s laboratory. She was going to do her real work.

She had forgotten all about the boy with pink scars.

Twenty-Seven

The lab was cool and dimly lit. Besides the vast amount of glassware, there were table-sized greenhouses of David's own design. They grew different varieties of seeds into seedlings, which were then tested, measured and charted for growth. They were grown in different types of soils, in different humidity levels, with different amounts of water. The plants were mated, grafted, flooded, malnourished and then tossed into the rubbish bin. Charts were examined, notes were made, figures assembled and then more tests were run. It was a dream to Mary, and she stayed working with them every evening after school until dusk, when they all walked together to their homes. Several days passed this way.

Bert lived in one of the buildings full of single room flats all full of single men. Mary asked David why he had a home of his own, and he told her it was because when he arrived the flats were all occupied. She realized she had no idea just how many people lived here at the institute She'd heard several estimates in the thousands, but surely someone had an exact count.

The days at the schoolhouse felt like a burden, dull and lonely. She talked to Oceane when she could, passing by in a hallway or over lunch. She was awed by her. Not all the scientists' wives followed their husbands to Africa. Oceane told her many of the wives stayed behind in Belgium, but she had been thrilled to move with her husband, who worked with minerals. *Congo Belge* was apparently full of raw materials that had potential to be put to all kinds of uses.

Oceane had no children, but Mary thought it would be rude to inquire as to why or if that was by choice. She wondered if it was why Oceane volunteered at the schoolhouse, yet she had a hunch that she was not a sentimental woman. Oceane

complained openly about her boredom, the dull and quiet evenings and the lack of culture offered in Yangambi, so far away from the larger, cosmopolitan cities. It was far less exotic than she had bargained for.

She remembered what the two men had told her in Dakar about resources being smuggled out of the country, but Mary had never heard of any of the minerals Oceane mentioned when they briefly discussed her husband research—no mention of diamonds.

During one of their conversations, Oceane mentioned Thomas Devault, a young scientist with whom her husband worked. When she heard how Mary and Thomas had met, how he had shared his umbrella during a tropical storm, she was giddy to the point of spectacle. She seemed to take pride in his chivalry, such a "*good boy*," though Oceane was certainly only a few years older than him, perhaps in her late-thirties.

Oceane was determined to throw a dinner party in honor of Mary's arrival. This was chiefly an excuse to throw a party, she assured Mary so as to sway objections, but also an unabashed scheme to get Mary and Thomas together once again. And so, the rest of her first week in *Congo Belge* and through her second, Oceane reveled in planning a party for her. Mary worked in the labs with Bert and David in the evenings, and a camaraderie developed between the three of them.

In many ways, she began to forget a war was being fought far to the north of her. She often forgot about the night in Dakar. She forgot about the pale pink scars, the handless boy watching her from the edge of the tree line.

Twenty-Eight

Quelle belle fête.

Ils ont fait une promenade au clair de lune.

Un roman en herbe menace de s'épanouir.

"I couldn't possibly wear this." Mary objected.

"Oh, you can, and you must," Oceane said, laughing. She laughed about everything and anything, her blonde hair bouncing while she did. Mary was not accustomed to such light-heartedness. Farmer's wives were a more serious lot.

"It's indecent!"

"No darling, it's European."

Mary wore the dress, bright red chiffon with a tulled skirt. It was low cut and exposed more of Mary than she had ever exposed before. The cut of it pushed her breasts up toward her throat and the girdle she wore underneath constricted her ribs so that every breath was ever-so-slightly more difficult to take. Every few minutes she used both her hands to pull the dress up until Oceane *tsk-ed* her several times and finally started slapping Mary's hands away when she reached for the neckline. Her father, what in God's name would he think of this gown? But she was a grown woman, and her father wasn't here. She was merely doing what the locals do. Or, what the Belgians do.

Mary had walked over to the Van Aller's home a few hours before the dinner party. It was a twenty-minute walk, and it was even more humid than usual. Oceane had insisted that she meet her husband and drink a martini with her before the guests arrived. When Mary showed up sweating, hair a mess, Oceane insisted on dressing her.

Jacques Van Aller was not quite what Mary had expected. He was shorter than she was by an inch or so and looked to be decades older than Oceane. He sat with his feet up on an ottoman and read a paper. News from the war, which gave Mary a jolt.

The Brits were breaking through in Tunisia—General Patton was there, too. The war felt far away from here. Though surely some of the inhabitants had family members fighting, a certain stake in the outcome, it felt that the war was put on a shelf, observed from a distance. Still, she made a resolution to order one of the papers, keep up with the news. Perhaps that awareness was the least she could do.

The home was one of the larger types available at the institute. It was the same brown brick as the other buildings, but it was two stories, hardwood floors inside and windows that overlooked river to the front and the forest to the west. It was in a cluster of homes near Bert and David's laboratory, the far western side of the institute. Large, exotic flowers filled vases set on side tables and bookshelves. A line of inlanders carried several trays of food and alcohol in the house from a door that led directly to the kitchen.

By the time guests arrived, some walking and some pulling up in coupes driven by men in uniform, Mary had already drunk two martinis. She was lightheaded, lighthearted—quite drunk really—and spent several hours chatting gaily. The alcohol helped to loosen her tongue, and though only an American farmer among cultured and cosmopolitan Europeans, felt she was coming across as quite charming. The dress helped. She must have met thirty people—Belgians, French and British. She was sitting on a love seat surrounded by a group of Belgians when she noticed a man with scarred hands. They were nearly mangled, the tip of his middle finger missing, the nail of his thumb gone too. He seemed to have burns up his arm, but they looked as if they were healing. She

wondered if it was connected to the others she had seen, the natives with pink scars and missing limbs.

When she approached the man, he stood up smiling. He insisted that she needed no introduction and apologized for not introducing himself earlier. Mary thought for a moment about the best way to approach the subject, the alcohol was wearing off and she feared committing a faux pas so close to the end of the evening.

"Doctor," she said, casually, "I have seen several others with the same scarring on their hands and bodies. I was wondering, what could cause such painful looking burns?"

He grinned and took a drink of his beer, it was darker than any she had ever seen and smelled like a meal in itself, meaty and sour. "Yes, there are quite an alarming amount of minerals in the Congo, unknown to most citizens of the world. This scarring was caused by an ore found in a mine to the South of us in Katanga Province. I don't know about others' scars, perhaps they have come from working in the mine."

"Children?" she asked, alarmed. "Do small children work in the mine?"

"I've never visited the mine myself. I've worked with samples of the ore, something called uranium. Quite vicious looking stuff, but we haven't found a use for it here at the Institute. However, I wish I had known about its ability to scar the skin before I started testing it all those years ago, *oui*?" He smiled and excused himself, moving on to a larger group watching a card game.

Bert was there for a bit, eating stewed lamb and drinking a martini. David was nowhere to be found, but Mary hardly noticed. Thomas was there, and by the end of the evening was guiding Mary around on his arm, introducing her to scientists, researchers, administrators. Mary had learned a lesson in Natal, and though she was handed several

drinks throughout the night, she would find a place to surreptitiously set them down and walk away from them.

The night ended, and she thanked the Van Aller's for a splendid party; it truly was a wonderful evening. Mary wasn't accustomed to being the center of attention, but didn't shy away from it.

Thomas had remained by her side the entire evening, but she had learned *several* lessons in Natal, so she tempered those assumptions. She saw how much sway Oceane had over Thomas, and perhaps Oceane had insisted that he escort her during the party. Perhaps he was only being friendly.

After the party, he offered to walk her home, a couple miles, while the rain held off. She agreed. He was a handsome man, both boyish and brilliant, a provocative combination to Mary. But it was also quite dark and very late. The half-moon was intermittently lost behind vast black clouds; she dreaded getting lost yet again. His tan suit reflected in a brief moment of moonlight, his face clean-shaven and young looking. She thought to ask him where he got his razors and if she might borrow one for David and Bert, who were beginning to look bedraggled with their beards coming in. Though some of the other scientists had hints of unwelcome beards coming in, most of the men at the party seemed to have received a supply of razors, or perhaps didn't need them.

"How was your first African dinner party" he asked her as they walked the dirt path toward her home.

"For an African dinner party, it was quite Belgian, wasn't it?"

"Ah, yes, *tres vrai."* He agreed, smiling. "How was your first Belgian dinner party?"

"Quite charming," she replied honestly.

"Yes, you are." He glanced at her without turning to face her. She blushed and turned to look at the forest, up at the moon, any direction but toward him, but everything was hidden in darkness, so she merely smiled, her arm in his.

Twenty-Nine

They reached her porch quickly. She may have still been buzzing from the party, the compliment, but she also suspected that Thomas knew a much faster way through the grounds than she had discovered on her own. She would have to study a map. This is what she was thinking about when he walked her up to her porch. He stood near to her as she walked through the narrow gate, guiding her by her elbow. Suddenly, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her close. He kissed her mouth, hard. It wasn't unwelcome, only surprising, and Mary instinctively pulled back.

Thomas stood watching her at her, an odd look on her face. "I hope I didn't take an unwelcome liberty," he said, as if he was sure he hadn't, and smiled at her. He said the word "liberty" like a true Frenchman, and the whole night suddenly felt surreal to Mary, some kind of Cinderella story set in the heart of African jungle.

Before she could respond, a door slammed nearby. She turned to see David Briar walking up the path from his house toward hers. She furrowed her brow. Surely, he wasn't coming to her house, now, with Thomas on the porch. Her in the elegant, if not quite indecent, evening gown.

"David," she said, confused, "I didn't expect to see you out so late."

"Just thought I'd drop in and say hi," he said, watching Thomas as he made his way through the open gate.

"All right, well, I'll see you in the lab on Monday. I'm just going to head in for the night." She smiled politely. The three of them stood awkwardly on the cement slab of her front porch.

"I should go," Thomas said, looking at David.

"No—" Mary said, too loudly.

"Quite right," David responded at the same time. "Quite right," he repeated. "Good evening to you, Devault."

Thomas took Mary's hand, squeezed it and walked slowly past David, nodding goodbye as he did. He turned right, back toward where they had come, and disappeared into the darkness.

"I'm not quite sure what you are doing here, David." Mary looked at him sternly.

He looked her up and down, taking in her dress, but his expression was impossible to read. "You should find someone else to spend your evenings with," was all he said.

"Excuse me, sir. I don't think that is your concern."

"Thomas has" he paused and seemed to hesitate, "a history. You don't want to get involved with him. He has a proclivity toward naive young women."

"Naive young women? Like me?" Mary huffed. She was becoming upset. "I am quite capable of taking care of myself. Stop this nonsense. Do not think for one second that I need protection from you." She turned around, unlocked her door quickly and slammed it behind her.

Her face burned down into her chest; her skin red with embarrassment and anger. She grappled with the back of her dress, turning in circles in the darkness. She stopped and tried to take a breath, remembering the girdle that was likely doing permanent damage to her internal organs. She lit the Aladdin lamp, the oil wick catching with a crackling spark. She sat down and took in the evening, recalling the faces and names of those she had met, her arm in Thomas', his abrupt kiss, David's accusations. Was it possible David was jealous? The idea was not *impossible*. Without thinking, a smile spread across her face.

"Oh, nonsense." She admonished herself out loud. She wasn't some foolish girl looking for a date; she was a scientist here for her career. She undressed, finally able to breathe for the first time that evening. She crawled into bed, her shoes, girdle and Oceane's dress strewn about the floor, realizing for the first time that she had never lived alone before. She stretched her limbs, pressing into the mattress, sighed and drifted off to sleep.

Thirty

Un cauchemar récurrent.

Vous n'êtes pas mon chevalier en armure brillante.

Une déclaration d'indépendance.

She heard a loud banging sound and woke with a start, sweating heavily. She had forgotten about the Aladdin Lamp which was now flickering, the oil completely empty. While she was watching, it burned out leaving the room black. The banging continued. She realized someone was at the door. She rubbed her eyes and got out of bed, finding her robe laying across the foot of her bed. She had one electric lamp in her parlor, which she flicked on brightly. She was grateful for the electricity here. She never had an electric lamp at home, though her father had been promising her mother he would have the electricity connected every year. Mary believed he didn't actually want it, resisting it as the older generations seem to do every change that comes their way.

She opened her door hesitantly to find David standing in front of her with a worried look on his face.

"David, what are you doing here?" she asked him. "What's the matter?"

David stopped abruptly and looked at her. He seemed genuinely shocked to see her angry.

"Really, David, what is this all about?"

"What?" he stammered. "What is this all about? You were shrieking in there. I heard you scream, are you all right?" He looked sincere, but Mary was confused. Was he really so desperate to wake her up in the middle of the night?

"I wasn't screaming. I was sleeping. I—" she stopped. Her dream floated, just a flicker, up into her consciousness. More than any visions, she remembered the feelings of

fear, desperation, hopelessness. She nodded at him while she tried to bring more of it to the surface. “I must have been dreaming, but I don’t remember it.”

David rubbed his forehead, clearly relieved. “I could have sworn,” he paused, “well, I thought perhaps Devault had come back.”

Mary was horrified that he would suggest such a thing, both for her sake and Thomas’. “I’m quite all right. Sorry to disturb you,” she responded curtly and turned to go back to bed.

“Wait,” he shouted. She stopped but didn’t turn to face him, lingering in her doorway. “Wait. You should see one of the doctors here. Are you taking quinine for malarial protection?”

“I am,” she said, finally turning around to face him. “It’s a prescription from my doctor back home.”

“Quite brutal stuff, that is; it could be the culprit. Talk to the doctor tomorrow. There’s better stuff out of Britain, now. All the soldiers are taking it. Quinine could just drive you mad.”

She nodded, determined to get back inside after being reminded of what the mosquitos here could do to a person. They were especially active after dark, great swarms of them floated by like miniature buzzing armadas.

“Wait, Mary. I’m sorry about earlier. I,” he stopped, looking down at his feet, “I’m sure you’re quite capable of taking care of yourself.”

“That’s right, David,” she said, it came out more fiercely than she intended. “That’s right. I can take care of myself.” She turned and went inside, shutting the door behind her.

Thirty-One

Manon called Mary into her small office first thing in the morning. She sat down behind her desk without offering Mary the chair opposite. Mary stood awkwardly behind the great bulk of the Sister's locked desk. The office was dark with only a small rectangular window and dark, wood-lined walls that absorbed any light that shone through it. Without preamble, Manon began questioning Mary about her ideas for the schoolhouse.

Mary had spent a week and a half watching the children. They sat in their classrooms, doing drills and squirming in their seats. They spent an hour, if the rain held, playing in the gardens aimlessly. If the institute was serious about creating a farm school with a legitimate farming curriculum, practical exposure could not be avoided. The children spanned in age from six to sixteen. Traditionally, most colonial teenagers were sent back to finishing school in Europe, but the war had prevented some travel the last few years. Also, several of the Jewish doctors wished to keep their children out of Europe all together. So, there were a few more older children than usual.

Mary believed that the children needed more practical experience. They needed to work with the animals, as she had. They needed to walk through the fields, understand the crops—what they looked like when they were healthy, sick, lacking nutrients, parched. To Mary's surprise, Manon agreed to her plan. But insisted that only one hour of the day could be given to Mary's "farm school." The children had more important things to learn, this she insinuated. But the inlander children could work with Mary all day, if they showed the interest. Manon had no objection to that.

Mary felt relieved that the Sister agreed so readily to her plan. Partly because she believed it was a solid route, but also because it was the only idea she could come up with. Children simply can't learn about farming inside of a classroom.

She was aware of her father's voice in her head. He was the one who had told her that, hadn't he? That farming couldn't be learned in school? In a way she realized he was right. But if she had enough time, she would teach the older children some of the theory behind crop hybridization and rotation, soil levels, seed storing and more. She would visit the library for appropriate books. Mary was too busy planning the curriculum that she had barely stopped to consider how excited she was about it.

She was so excited that she hurried home, changed into her coveralls and boots, and went back into the schoolhouse ready to begin the hour-long rotations. She would start with the smallest children, and she would simply recreate the tasks her mother and father had her do at that age. She would work her way up to the oldest and do the same. The oldest could be milking, planting, harvesting and working on the theories she learned at Iowa State.

It was a day well spent. The children seemed to enjoy their time in the barns and out in the fields, though some complained about the smell of manure and a small girl in a pink frock slipped in the mud. Others stared at her blank-eyed until she realized they didn't speak English. She would have to recruit one of the nuns to translate. Perhaps when she had enough time and had caught up on sleep, she could begin writing out the lessons in French with the help of her French language book.

By the end of the day she was exhausted. She realized that in the first few weeks, though she observed the children, she had failed to engage with any of them. Their energy fascinated her. She found they could run endlessly, and she let them do just that,

through the fields, kicking up the gray-brown mud, picking up stray kola nuts, pulling down ripe bananas and eating them where they stood. And perhaps without realizing it, and certainly without admitting it, she had enjoyed the day. Immensely.

Thirty-Two

She still spent the evening in the lab but was cross with David for his odd behavior over the weekend. She dragged in the day's dirt, manure and dust and realized the stark contrast between her and the two scientists drifting back and forth like apparitions in their dimly-lit offices, spending all day indoors in crisp white lab coats. Her own cheeks were red from the sun, her hair matted and tussled from wearing a sun helmet all day. In fairness, Bert's lab coat was soiled with mud splotches and coffee stains, so perhaps they weren't that different after all.

She left the lab earlier than the men that day. Exhausted, sweat-covered from working in the heat and from wrangling children all day, she wanted to bathe and get in bed. She had to admit that her sleep was poor, which could be related to the medicine she was given for malaria. She decided she would see the doctor that week.

She walked home, watching the edge of the forest in her peripheral. Though it did frighten her, she always found herself secretly hoping for a flash of orangutan or jungle cat. She would even be happy to see a wild boar or deer, but so far, she hadn't seen much of any wildlife. She knew the animals were there though, just lurking behind the curtain of the forest's outer walls.

She passed by the schoolhouse and a couple one-story buildings until a massive rectangular building caught her attention. All the buildings, she realized, were made of the same brown brick—every single one. This one was huge in scope and had three parallel rows of small rectangular windows, giving it an almost Oriental look. She saw a few people coming and going until she heard knocking from one of the windows. She looked up and saw Thomas standing in front of the one of the windows on the lowest level. He waved; she waved back awkwardly. She looked down at herself, realizing her

coveralls were mud-caked and her hair was worn loose in a single braid the way the German wives in Iowa wore it. He held up one finger, as if indicating that she wait for him.

While he was leaving the enormous brick building, she worked desperately to clean her pants and straighten her hair. She was bent over brushing her pant leg when he walked out.

"*Bonjour*, Mary," he said, smiling.

"Oh, hi, Thomas. What are you doing here?"

"I work here, Mary. I live here, too."

"Here, in this building?" she asked, confused.

He laughed, gently pushing her away at the same time. "In the library? American women, they are strange, *non*? I live here in Gambi and work at the Institute. I read books *here*," he gestured toward the massive structure, "at the library." He winked at her.

He offered to walk her home and she conceded. She felt the need to apologize for her appearance, then immediately regretted it. She wasn't truly sorry. After all, it's what she moved to *Congo Belge* for, to work as a farmer. Or, a scientist, perhaps. But it wasn't to wear low cut evening gowns and sleep with curlers in her hair.

They walked passed the schoolhouse while Manon was locking the doors for the night. Mary didn't *necessarily* hate the nun, but they weren't friendly, either. She nodded to Manon as they walked by. The sister made a shocked expression, then merely stared at the two of them as they walk passed. Thomas smiled and waved, but Manon's expression didn't change. She actually crossed herself and turned to walk the other direction. They looked at each other and suppressed a laugh. She was a fierce woman, no doubt about that.

Mary invited Thomas in for a cup of tea. She wasn't actually sure she had any tea, but Liombi would be bringing dinner soon and that would at least be something. They sat in her parlor and Thomas told her about the books he was researching in the library. He was interested in radioactivity, the work of Otto Hahn—a German, he admitted. That was why he went to the library, he was anonymous in the stacks and stacks of books. He surely couldn't be seen reading a German book out and about, that would invite alarm.

"The quest for knowledge knows no war!" he exclaimed valiantly. Mary considered this. What lengths had she gone for knowledge, for science? She'd left her family, traveled halfway across the world through a war zone. He had been raising his arms expressively, standing for emphasis and when he came to sit down, he said very near Mary on the loveseat.

"Mary, *ma Souris*, you are the first woman I feel that I can talk to in ages." Pale blue eyes and ash-colored blond hair—he was slight but handsome. Night was falling now, and Mary was getting nervous both that Liombi would come and interrupt this moment and also that she wouldn't.

Thirty-Three

Remember that the African, though his skin is black and his ways strange to you, is a sensitive and intelligent individual and will bitterly resent slurs against his race, tribe, or country. -Pocket Guide to West Africa

They didn't hear the door handle turn or the low murmur of Liombi and Malu's conversation as they entered Mary's house. It wasn't until Liombi cleared her throat that Mary noticed them. Malu had turned to leave, apparently wanting nothing to do with what he walked in to. Mary pulled away from Thomas so violently that she left him leaning forward awkwardly. The sun was setting, and the room glowed a soft orange, birds sang in their nests, roosting songs, evening calls to end the day.

Thomas stood up promptly as if to excuse himself. "No," Mary nearly yelled. "No," she said again, much quieter. "Thomas, stay and have dinner with us."

Thomas looked at Mary and then looked slowly over at Malu and Liombi. His eyes narrowed, but never lost their mirth. Thomas always seemed to be about to either tell a joke or already laughing at a private joke he never shared.

"I cannot eat with them, Mary. It is not law, *non*, but politeness. It *is* law in other colonies here in Africa, you well know, and I was raised in a--," he paused, seeming to consider the proper English word, "traditional manner."

"We will go, Mary." Malu spoke very quietly, not directly to her. His eyes were intense but averted, looking at the ground.

"Wewe unazidi, boy." Thomas murmured, watching Malu intently.

"Come, Malu. Goodnight, Miss Mary. We'll leave you to your dinner." Liombi set the meal down, which Mary had grown accustom to sharing with them a few evenings a week. Sometimes, if she wasn't particularly irritated with David, she would walk over

and invite him to eat with them. Neither of them looked at her or Thomas as they left her house.

After they left, she looked at Thomas hoping he would explain their behavior. He said nothing, merely sat back down on the loveseat, caressing her hand while she stood.

"Thomas," she asked, "why would you not eat with them? Because they're natives? That's quite--," she paused, unsure of what exactly *it* was exactly.

"It is uncommon practice to eat with *les noirs*. There are reasons they live separately you know—the malaria can spread, other diseases, too. You are quite naive; I often hear that things are different in America. But also, that boy and I have had a disagreement in the past. He creates trouble for the Belgian government. He's quite dangerous, Mary. *Oui, t*r*ai* dangerous. A rebel, an African seditionist, a traitor in this war."

"Yes," Mary agreed, hesitantly, "He's certainly intense. But I wonder if you got to know him. I don't know. He seems quite all right, really." The mood in the room was changed. Mary would not admit to her naivety, but she suddenly felt very confused. It didn't seem like something she could ask Liombi about, and David was cavalier toward proper etiquette. The Belgians seemed to insinuate that it was because he was British and completely uncivilized.

"It is dark now, Mary. I must rise with the sun to begin my research. I will see you on Friday evening, *oui*? Perhaps the Van Allers will show us a proper meal. I'll ask Oceane about another party, smaller this time."

He left her to eat her dinner alone. She decided it was time to write a letter to Dakar.

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