

Almost Man

a novel

*For Dadai, who wrote books
and Dadubhai, who bound them into being*

“And I could no longer predict where I would find my heroes.”

—Ta-Nahisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

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Epilogue

Prologue

I met Conrad in the brightly lit arrivals hall of Phalaborwa Airport. “Welcome to Africa,” he said impressively.

We shook hands. Conrad’s palm felt coarse against mine. His eyes glistened. He was about an inch taller than I was, with closely cropped hair and a mischievous smile. He sported a green khaki shirt unbuttoned to his chest and tight shorts that ended above his knees. His skin had been tanned to a bacon-like crimson. A snakeskin belt was secured against his shadow of a paunch, and a Leatherman multi-tool lurked beside the buckle. The first time I saw him use it, he pried open a can of beans in three gentle lifts; the second time, he clipped off a section of highway fence so a trapped leopard could return to the bush.

“You can call me Conrad,” he said. “And you’re... Neil?”

I nodded.

Conrad chuckled. “That’s a white name. *What’s the name yo mama gave you?*”

I wondered whether to be offended by this microaggression. Was it any different from the reactions of countless other people who smiled determinedly through our first meeting, not batting an eyelash, appearing to readily accept me as Neil, then prodding me in other ways: where was I “originally” from, were my parents Afghan or Turkish, was my aquiline nose and olive skin relics of a forefather from southern Italy?

I decided to stand my ground. “Neel *is* my real name. It means *blue* in Sanskrit.”

I decided not to tell Conrad about the name I was given at birth: Neelkanth, the blue-throated one, a name for the Hindu God of destruction, Shiva, whose throat turned blue from the poison he once swallowed, paradoxically, to save the world. Neelkanth was the name my grandfather had chosen for me. He had died soon after I was born. I had no memory of him, but sometimes I imagined him sitting squarely on his four-poster bed, pouring over tattered volumes, folding the corners of pages that held promise, his glasses pushed down to the tip of his nose, the ceiling fan creaking as it spun. In the end, my grandfather had picked out a name that my college professors and American friends stumbled over, one that new acquaintances, even those of Indian descent, struggled to get right. And so, after my first year of college, I had decided to make it easy for everyone. I now introduced myself exclusively as Neel.

Conrad hesitated. “Very well. By the way, what’s your favourite thing to eat for breakfast?”

“Sausages. Definitely sausages.”

“Excellent,” he said. “We’ll make sure you have sausages every morning.”

We walked to the end of the hall, past metal beaten into animal shapes: a copper giraffe on awkward feet bending down to take a sip, two antelope at the water’s edge, a hyena frozen in a sprint, a baboon perched high on a rock from which a fountain poured forth. Men in long, flowy dashikis rushed past. They spoke a tongue I did not understand, and the chatter of their voices rose above the din like islands from the sea. In the distance, on the border with Phalaborwa, the woods of Kruger National Park began as a wall and blended into an impenetrable darkness. I had

read somewhere that in Sesotho, one of South Africa's eleven official languages, the name Phalaborwa translates to *better than the South*. I hadn't been to the South, but I took to the name immediately.

The luggage had been dumped in piles by the windows. People were milling around the heaps, taking swoops into it at intervals. I dug my way in and started looking for my backpack. I'd packed it with the only possessions I hadn't sold or donated before leaving the U.S.—a pair of old blue jeans, two pairs of canvas shorts, five T-shirts, a sweatshirt, my shaving kit, a small bottle of moisturiser, five pairs of socks, and as many sets of underwear.

The crowd was beginning to thin. Families left with their trunks and children, businessmen collected their suitcases smartly, and a flock of malodorous hippies finally made off with their technicolour collectibles. I sifted through the piles for many agonising minutes before anxiously turning to Conrad.

"I don't see it," I said. "My backpack—it's not here."

He seemed ready for it. "Looks like you're getting a proper African welcome," he said kindly.

Conrad led me to the airline counter. The woman behind the desk had a long neck, beady eyes, and thick, circular glasses. She stared at me unflinchingly as I spoke. When I was done explaining my predicament, she handed me a complaint form, pointed to a slot in the far wall, and, without a word, turned away.

I wanted to scream. (Tantrums always seemed to get things done in America.) That one pair of faded boxers at the bottom of my camera bag—I used it to wrap my extra lens—had suddenly

become the only clean item of clothing in my possession. My daypack rested at my feet, full of books, such classics as “The Unbearable Lightness of Being,” “1984,” “Freedom,” and “The Alchemist.” This last book had been pressed into my palms by a friend on the eve of my departure. *No matter that you’re being forced to leave the U.S.; the world is a wondrous place and you’ll find your niche in it*, she had said. I’d accepted the book out of politeness and hadn’t yet had a chance to recycle it. Suddenly, I had a vision of myself under a thorny acacia, with nothing but my boxers on, reading Coelho to a burgeoning headache.

Conrad took the complaint form, filled in the essentials, and dropped it into the slot. Then, he placed a soothing hand on my shoulder. “Come on, Neel. It’s time to hit the road.”

His tone was one of finality, not defeat, and I found myself obeying him. I noticed a tattoo on the ridge of his neck: a barcode, simple and neatly done, that was sucked into shadow as he stepped into the night.

Conrad’s Land Rover smelled vaguely of rust. The car was ancient—missing lights on the dashboard, leather seats that had cracked along their seams. A thin layer of red dust coated its surfaces; I left fingerprints on the handle as I yanked my door shut. At my feet, bolted to the car’s frame, was a plastic trash bin, the kind that’s usually found in bathrooms. Next to it, a plume of screwdrivers and ranches stuck out of a small wooden bucket.

We moved on sparse roads. After a few blocks of dwellings and manicured lawns, the town began to fall away, replaced by dense thickets of low-growing trees. We sped past gas stations, diners, roadside tea stalls. As we merged onto the R-40, the last remnants of civilisation vanished. The highway was impossibly straight, heedless of the undulating terrain on which it

moved. For minutes at a time, Conrad took his hands off the wheel and brought them to rest behind his head. During these periods, fearing he would fall asleep, I tried to make conversation. I thanked him for the opportunity to be his assistant, that it was kind of him to give me free lodgings. “I’ll make you earn your keep,” he retorted. I commented on the quality of South African roads. “A glorious relic of apartheid,” he nodded. At a deserted traffic intersection, he perked up suddenly. He told me that he had a surprise for me, that her name is Nwana. I asked him questions about this surprise, but he revealed nothing more.

About an hour later, the car began to slow. Fenced forests now lined the road on both sides. With a sudden jerk of the wheel, Conrad drove us off the tar. We followed a dirt road up a hill, directly into the bush. We began to move up ridges, along them, and then down again into troughs. The Land Rover’s headlights cast bold shadows as it swept the land. The trees lining the road were oddly stunted; when our beams fell on them, they seemed to cower. We passed wire fences, anxious owls, and a gate with a lone guard. Eventually, we stopped.

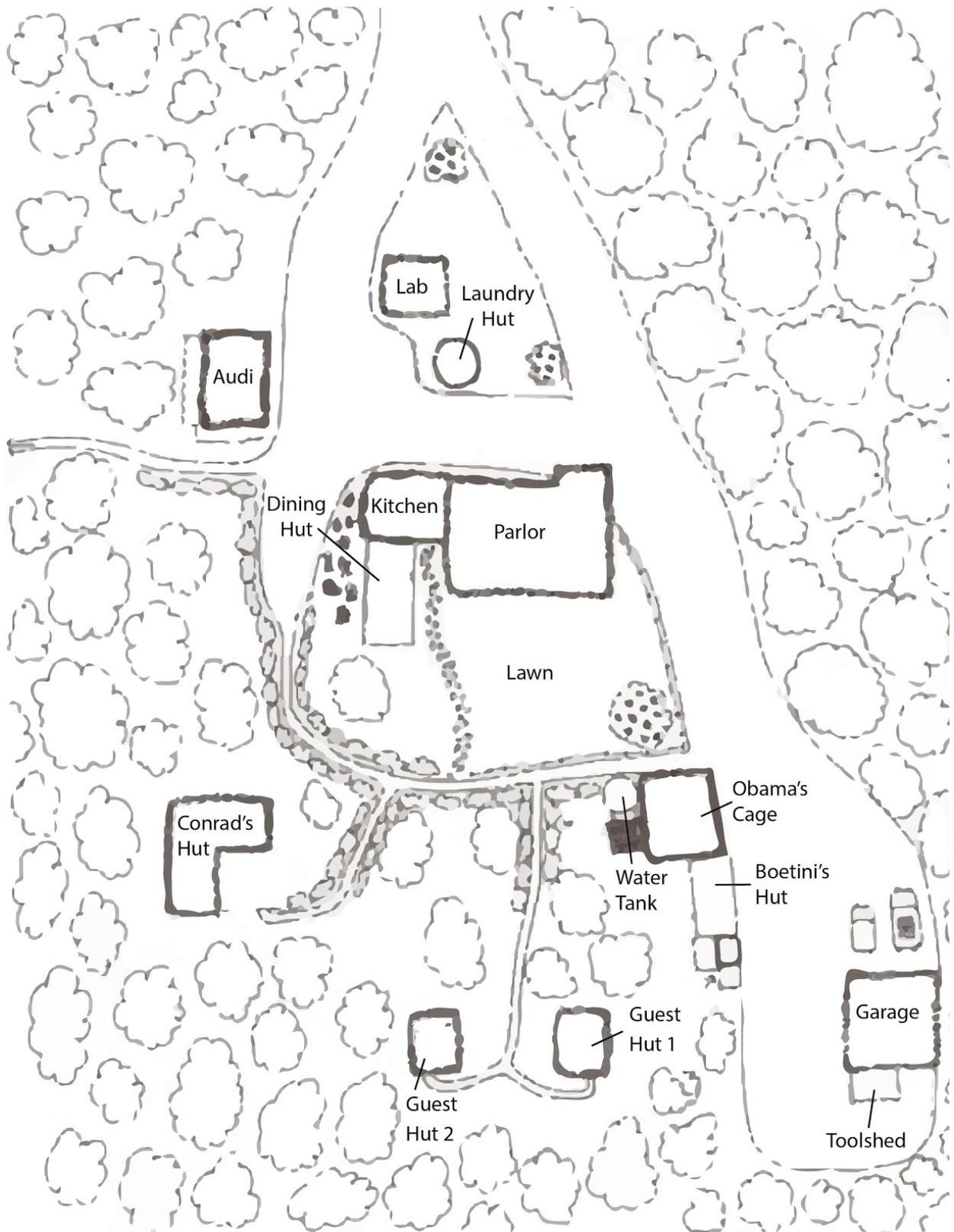
A giant hippo skull balanced on a pole marked the head of Conrad’s driveway. A thatched hut loomed behind it. In the distance, I saw a giant cage and the rapidly flitting shadow of its captive.

“The seat belt sign has now been turned off,” Conrad announced. “Welcome to Camp Mopane. Have a pleasant stay, and thank you for flying Venter Airways.”

Part I

—

Words swallowed, and desires
and motives blooming like children sired
there where all the memories lie
in a cradle nursed by crocodiles



Number 29 of the Whetby Reserve was a patchy establishment. It boasted thatched huts, half-cleared paths, and a greying lawn. The bush surrounded it, extending into Kruger's two-million hectares just a few miles away. In the distance, you could see the cattails of the artificial wetland. Blue waxbills lurked among the reeds and antelope came to drink from it by night. Things had a way of creeping forward here. Even the camp's rightful owners lived in the shadows. When the lights turned off every evening, the wilderness would barrel in and engulf us whole. By day, it was the trees that threatened to take over. Most numerous among them were the mopane. Their skinny red trunks rose adamantly from the undergrowth. They bent over the tops of the huts like children inspecting bugs in their backyard. The trees were everywhere, so abundant that the camp itself had been named in their honor.

The kitchen occupied the geometric center of Mopane. It was a thatched extension of the parlor, a functional afterthought. Hastily assembled shelves lined the space. Wood jutted out at the ends, and branches wove in and out of frames. The roof was steeply sloped. Iron netting also rose to meet it, lending it the air of a giant birdcage. The room was always bathed in light, and the winds left a coat of dust on its surfaces. We cooked in the elements and liked it that way.

With shelves full of fruit, drums filled with rice, and cartons spilling over with cereal and beans, the kitchen had the highest concentration of nutrition for miles around. Monkeys, warthogs, and babblers circled it by day, their eyes set squarely on its rickety cabinets. At night, a porcupine led the vigil; the characteristic thrush-thrush of its spines were our midnight church bells. For the

most part, the room's battlements kept wildlife at bay. Its flimsy netting created as much of a physical barrier as a psychological one. Animals have a way of respecting boundaries; Conrad could just as well have marked his territory with urine. But the kitchen wasn't built to keep everything out. Hidden between the beams were small, inconspicuous gaps. These served as secret gateways for the squirrels.

"Meet Cindy," Conrad said, as the prize of his harem stepped forward. "I've had her since she was a few days old, saved her from the roof of a demolished resort. Now she has her own family. She gave birth to five little pups just earlier this year, and she's pregnant again, the little fucker."

Conrad proceeded to scratch Cindy's belly. Two litters in six months, I thought. That's twelve pups, or twenty-four times her weight in milk and food. While the numbers whirled around in my head, Cindy pushed away from Conrad and returned to her peanuts. It took her less than a minute to chow through them. Then, she scurried along the countertop and leaped onto the breakfast shelf.

"Now you know why we never seal those bags," said Conrad. He gazed fondly at a cereal carton that had come to life. It swung violently from side to side, bumping into its neighbors. A bottle of Tabasco sauce fell to the ground and shattered.

I smiled. In Africa, you learned to share your Bran Flakes with slutty squirrels.

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A short walk down from the kitchen brought you to a wood-framed cage as large as my own hut. It had a tin roof, an uninterrupted water supply, and even a tiny outhouse. It rose immediately

adjacent to the path, so that its resident had first dibs on the hair, sleeve, and affections of anyone who chose to wander down it. I received a tremendous fright on my first night. The monkey leaped at me in the darkness, reaching through the netting with his black, hairy fingers, and grabbed my shirt collar. I tried in vain to escape his clutches. Soon, his other palm closed around my ear, yanking on it, pulling me steadily closer to the cage. His breath fogged my glasses. In the darkness, I imagined wet canines bared for murder. It was Conrad's intervention that had finally secured my release.

"*Ka Ka Ka Ka*," he had crooned, sticking his arm into the cage. "Obama, my child. This is Neel; he's a friend."

Obama, the vervet monkey.

I took him in, grey hide, dexterous eyebrows. In the moonlight, his face shone with a feral intelligence. I had learned about monkeys in biology class. Old Worlds, such as the vervet monkey, ruled large parts of Africa and Asia; they cracked open nuts with rocks in the scrubland, terrorised pilgrims in Hindu temples, and stood guard over the last swaths of rain forest in the Southeast Asian archipelago. They were exceptional creatures, forces to reckon with. They were so extraordinary that one might even be flattered to be a monkey's namesake.

"Obama. Is that a common name in these parts, perhaps a Shangaan word?" I asked quietly.

"No, silly," Conrad replied, "He's named after the American President, of course."

"And you named him?"

“No, the old man who passed him on to me as a baby picked it out for him. I saw no reason to change it.”

“None at all?”

Conrad shook his head. “None,” he said somberly.

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Beyond Obama’s cage, at the far edge of camp, stood another hut. This wasn’t a cage, at least not in any conventional sense. A grimy curtain hung across the doorway, and the lone bulb inside glowed dim. The only item of furniture inside was a cot with a metal frame. The rest of the floorspace—not that there was much of it—was covered with an assortment of broken objects, too damaged to be used, too precious to be thrown away. The walls supported other treasures: faded tees, a jacket, a soiled pair of jeans, pouches of tobacco, an old transistor, a wrought-iron pan, wrinkled posters of women with afros and heavy make-up. This was the abode of Boetini, Conrad’s manservant, the third human in camp.

“Boetini,” Conrad called. “Milk, please. It’s almost feeding time.”

A shuffling broke out beyond the trees. The branches parted to reveal a limping figure with a machete. A heady swirl of marijuana smoke announced his approach. He wore his jeans low and his gaze even lower. He was slightly cross-eyed, but not in the way that would terrify a child. He hobbled up to meet Conrad and greeted him devotedly. His wheezy laugh reminded me of the hyenas from *The Lion King*.

Conrad and Boetini spoke for a while, mostly in Shangaan. I caught a smattering of words—“India,” “church,” “swimming pool,” and the mysterious name from the night before, “Nwana.”

“Milk, please,” Conrad said finally.

Boetini shot me a lopsided grin and scampered off.

“He works twenty-seven days a month,” Conrad explained, “Nights are off, except for milk duty. And he spends the last few days of every month visiting his wife and girlfriend.”

“Wife *and* girlfriend?”

“It’s like you Indians and your cows—but forgive me, perhaps that is no longer a thing? The blacks like to have multiple wives and mistresses. The affluent ones have many of each. But Boetini is poor, so he only has two. It’s a blessing really. Fewer fucks a day keeps the AIDS away.”

My jaw dropped, but Conrad appeared not to notice. He went on to inform me that Boetini was treated well in camp. Whenever fish was bought, he always got some. His entire intake of weed and tobacco—“the man is always a little stoned”—was also provided for. Compared to the slavish bonds that servants had to sign in other places, his agreement with Conrad was non-binding. Boetini could leave whenever it pleased him.

But the perks came at a cost. I glanced down at my watch. 11:48 P.M. Gratitude, it seemed, could be commanded at any hour of day or night.

Across the path from Obama's, on the far side of the garage, lay the fourth and final cage in Camp Mopane. As we approached, I noticed reinforced tarpaulin roofing and a large infrared-lamp. The smell of fresh dung permeated the room, and the floor was soggy beneath my feet. I entered gingerly, my eyes fixed on a large lump of fluorescent blankets in the corner.

“And this is Nwana,” Conrad announced. “I promised you a surprise. This is it.”

As he spoke, Nwana's striped, shapely head poked out of a gap in the blankets.

“A *zebra*?” I cried.

“It'll be your job to feed Nwana,” Conrad said. “Remember, she looks big but she's still a foal. Just four months old. She needs a liter of milk five times a day. 7 A.M., 11 A.M., then 3, 7, 11 P.M. The water and horse pellets need to be replenished daily. Once you two get comfortable, you may also take her on daily runs.”

As I looked on, the zebra leaped to her feet. She ignored me completely and headed straight for Conrad's armpits. Perhaps she expected udders. What she found instead was a shower of attention. Suddenly, Conrad's hands were all over her, moving smoothly down her flanks, under her belly, and up again over her back. He rubbed and pressed with abandon, while Nwana stood quiet and still. When his hands reached her rump, he began to scratch in slow, deep strokes, moving in a circle around her lady parts. I looked on with a mixture of awe and disgust as Nwana closed her eyes, lifted her tail, and spread her legs. Then, she began to back up against Conrad's

hand. There could be no mistaking what was happening.

“She likes it,” Conrad chuckled.

“That’s disgusting,” I cried. “She’s just a child.”

“All the more—it gets the hormones flowing.”

Conrad gave Nwana’s rump a smart smack. I winced. After an attack from a Presidential namesake and a tryst with neo-slavery, it was this bout of playfulness that finally broke me.

“Here, why don’t you try?” he offered coolly.

I like to think I acted on impulse. Wasn’t this how the rebellious children of dictators eventually ended up succeeding them? Nwana’s fur felt soft to the touch, and my fingers sank into it effortlessly. She cocked her head to acknowledge my presence. Then, after the briefest of interruptions, she began backing up against my hand as well. In time, a bottle with a rubber nipple dutifully appeared through a gap in the wall. Conrad grabbed it and thrust it into my hands.

“Try to enjoy it,” he whispered.

I *was* enjoying it, I thought, but not as much as Nwana. I held the bottle to her lips and tilted it to start the flow. Her gulps were as large as cans of soda, as loud and deep as a baritone in forte.

Gluck. Gluck. Gluck.

She downed the liter of milk in nineteen seconds. Savoring its taste, she rubbed her neck against

my side and closed her eyes in quiet contentment.

On a good day, Conrad liked to call himself a disease ecologist. For him, it wasn't so much a job as the epitaph on his grave. His entire life had been building up to it. After romanticising the bush through his days at a Pretoria prep school, he had gone off to college to pursue a degree in nature conservation. At the time, it was the most lucrative major in the land; over thirty percent of Limpopo's jobs were to be found in the business. Most graduates started off as game rangers at one of the many wildlife reserves in the area; they spent their days tending to the bush and leading wealthy guests on safaris. The game ranger was the most exciting entry-level position on the planet—compare it to the note taker or the coffee elf. But Conrad would have none of it.

“No, I could never be a ranger,” he said, shaking his head mournfully. “I love being a ranger too much to be degraded into being forced to do it. I have no savings to speak of, and this camp in the middle of nowhere to call my home. But boy, am I happy!”

After opting out of a traditional career trajectory, he had gone on to earn a Master's degree in parasitology. More unusual still, he had floated his own company. Emdes Consulting was a one-man enterprise, and as far as I could tell, the only one of its kind in the Kruger. Emdes, which stood for Environment Management, Development, and Ecological Services, was an acronym of Conrad's own invention. Its clients included many of the local game reserves, hunting farms, and wildlife breeding projects. The who's who of the Limpopo wildlife scene, which was saying surprisingly much, had all heard of Conrad Venter.

Conrad had played his cards well. His life was remarkably similar to a ranger's, and he got to

lead it on his own terms. Time at Emdes proceeded like the seasons on a tropical island, conspicuous by their monotony but never boring because of it. On most days, we conducted site visits to assess animal and environmental health conditions. At each site, we would drive around collecting water and fecal samples. We stored the water in carefully labeled mason jars. The feces we collected had to be moist and fresh, soft to the touch. Occasionally, we also swept the reserves for ticks. A butterfly net in hand, I would walk along parallel lines in a given clearing, making swift broom-like sweeps at regular intervals. Emdes could be contracted for still other jobs, but many of these were beyond the everyday, and Conrad insisted on doing them himself. Aerial surveys using remote-controlled aircraft, the design and construction of artificial wetlands, the removal of bat nests from people's musty attics: these were tasks that required great expertise. They couldn't be delegated to a lowly assistant like me.

Conrad ran his business straight out of camp. At one end stood the laboratory hut, the cornerstone of his enterprise. Sliding doors partitioned it into an antechamber, a cramped wet-lab, and a cozy back office. A sink with three racks of lab utensils waiting to be cleaned stood by the entrance. Everything was reused, even disposable plastic pipette-tips. Supplies were hard to come by in the hinterland. Conrad had a meticulous cleaning process for his apparatus, but he hardly ever followed it through. "There's nothing that I hate more than doing dishes," he said.

Located beyond the first set of sliding doors was a whitewashed lab area. The room couldn't have been more than eight by ten feet. There were shelves of chemicals, files, and books lining the walls. The cabinets were filled with oddly shaped glassware and dark bottles containing more chemicals. The countertops housed an extensive array of instruments: water quality monitors,

ion-concentration measuring probes, a vortex mixer, a microscope, a centrifuge, and a fume-hood. There were two incubation ovens, including one that Conrad had built himself. He had hollowed out an old microwave and fitted in a thermostat and a hairdryer. The way he saw it, it was baffling that more people didn't build their own gadgets.

The most popular test conducted in the Emdes laboratory was the poop floatation test. The excrement had to be mashed up into a powder and sugar solution added to it; this would allow the eggs and larvae to float up and be strained out. A few drops of the solution were then placed in a specially designed glass slide, called a McMaster slide, and observed under the microscope. When a wildlife reserve was struck by disease, identifying the culprit was easy if you had Emdes on your side. The lab had a parasite catalogue and a wooden box of jars containing preserved specimens of all the local arthropods and worms. Anything you could find in the mouth, nose, gut, hide, brain, or anus of an animal was also to be found in our collection. Ordinarily, Conrad didn't even need his catalogues to identify a critter. One look was enough.

“Five *Stroncholoides*, three *Taenia*, and seven *Trichomonas*,” he would rattle off, squinting through the microscope's tarnished eyepiece. “Wow, this cow is loaded.”

Conrad loved parasites. He loved them so much that he would often read parasitology textbooks in bed. He called it “light bedtime reading—a great alternative to half-hearted masturbation.”

The third and smallest section of the lab was his office. It housed the lab's air-conditioner, which Emdes had been forced to purchase in order to be accredited. According to the Danish accreditation company, the air conditioner was supposed to maintain the lab at a steady 20°C at

all times. The dirty secret was that it never did.

“Winters are relatively pleasant here,” Conrad had explained. “And temperatures in the lab rarely move far on either side of 20°C. But during the summer months, when temperatures go up to 55°C and birds drop dead from the sky,”—his tone suggested grave sincerity—“the air-conditioner is worthless. My accredited lab bakes like everything around it. For a time, homemade solutions such as wet blankets appear to work. But when all else fails, we plop our temperature-sensitive samples in the fridge.”

Conrad’s office also housed his laptop, which always lay open on his desk. The first time I had walked in there, his screensaver was flitting back and forth between pictures of parasites and naked women. A striking blonde with generously parted legs shared screen time with the slimy, staggered segments of a tapeworm. Next, a dark-haired Goth with mango breasts and a bulging lip appeared, followed closely by an oval, hairy larval tick. More pornography was to be found on the walls. And more worms.

The pictures, I realised in time, represented the two central themes of Conrad’s life. First, the miniscule beings that you could only see under a microscope—invisible creatures that could bring down giants in a matter of days, maiming, manipulating, and killing in a thousand different ways. Parasites that hijacked minds, infected populations, and orchestrated slow, painful deaths. They were symbols of great power and astounding ingenuity, and, for some reason, they struck a chord with Conrad.

And second, the women.

“I *love* women,” he confessed to me on many different occasions. His eyes would light up as he spoke. “I’m just really thankful they exist. Aren’t they absolutely *beautiful*? I make it a point to closely observe every woman I see. When they change their hairstyles, the shade of their lipstick, when they lose weight or gain it, I never fail to notice.”

Remarkably, the ladies seemed to like him too. Whenever we went into Hoedspruit, a dust-caked town that evoked the American West, we would bump into women who knew him. The conversations would start in earnest, touching on the weather or pleasantries. Their voices would be subdued, their glances, angled. Inevitably, however, both parties would lapse into shameless flirting. Conrad was both generous and genuine with his compliments. He had a knack for picking out the best things about a woman—someone’s shapely chin, another’s sculpted forearm, a third’s riveting sense of humor—things their owners didn’t feel insecure about. In the end, he would leave every woman he met, even the mustachioed cashier at the hardware store, with trembling fingers and a fierce blush.

“I think I’m peaking sexually only now, at the ripe old age of thirty-seven,” Conrad admitted to me one evening, just a few days into my stay. “Once upon a time, I was one of those talkative virgins pretending to be Doctor Love. In college, my friends came to me for romantic advice. My opinions weren’t yet tainted by experience, you see. But *I* was the one who needed help on the practical front. My first was a girl who probably took pity on me. I was twenty-two at the time. Can you believe that? That’s how old my grandmother was when she gave birth to Uncle Robbie, third in line to the Venter throne.”

“I hear you, Conrad.” I paused, wondering if I was expected to contribute as well. “I had my first

kiss at nineteen. Among my peers, that was pretty late too.”

“Yes, that *is* late,” he said with an approving nod.

Conrad pondered my predicament. There seemed to be an insatiable hunger about him, one that neither food nor sex could quite hope to quell. It was the kind of urge that moved its possessor to gobble up thoughts, motives, even ideas whole. It turned some of us into philanthropists, others into chauvinists and bigots, and a handful into hypersexual men-of-the-world.

“We’re late bloomers, you and I,” he said. “But you know what? Once you’re on the bandwagon, there’s nothing like a good fuck. Absolutely nothing.”

“Agreed,” I replied quietly.

“The little man down there”—he pointed toward his crotch—“has been to heaven many times. He tells me it’s a dapper place.”

“Does he?” I was grinning now.

“Over the next few weeks, you’ll meet Jenna. She’s my ex. I was going to marry her, you know. Oh man, the things we used to do together. I know I leave my laptop lying around, but there’s a folder in it you must never open. The name is pretty self-explanatory—PRIVATE, all caps. Anyway, that folder documents, among other things, some of the most beautiful things that two human beings have ever done with each other. It’s a relief that we live out here in the bush. I would have been thrown in jail if anyone ever heard Jenna’s screams.”

I sat up squarely. “But you guys broke up?” I asked.

“Yes, Jenna wanted children.”

“How terrible of her.”

Conrad ignored my sarcasm. “I hate children; they’re loud and annoying and idiotic. They say things sane adults would never say, and you’re expected to think they’re being cute. They’re also selfish and evil, with no consideration whatsoever for anyone other than themselves. Bringing up children mostly involves civilising them. I don’t want in on any of that dirty work, no thank you. Why would I, when the alternative is the pleasure of adult company?” He paused. “Besides, I didn’t view the two of us as a suitable pair of parents. I was forced to be Jenna’s parent too often.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Only when I look at my PRIVATE folder. She was too much trouble. Besides,” he paused, his voice suddenly dreamy. “I have a new girlfriend now.”

Conrad’s attention travelled to his phone, which had begun to vibrate. He picked it up, beaming.

“Speak of the—it’s a text from Sophie. Want to hear it?”

Without waiting for a response, he started to read. “*Miss you, my sweetheart. Muaaaah. Spent all day thinking about you. It’s lonely here, so far away. Why are you so far away? Come to me, baby. I can’t live without you. What are you doing? Having wet dreams about me, I hope. Hehe wink wink.*”

As he finished, Conrad smacked his lips. “Oh yes, she loves me. She really does,” he said.

It was the first of many messages that Conrad would read in my presence. Some of them were more explicit than others, but there was nothing so private that couldn't be read out loud. A few days later, I found him entertaining the salesman at the butcher store with Sophie's texts. Hidden behind the T-bone shelf, the two of them were giggling like teenagers. Sophie's texts were badly constructed; her emotions seemed asinine in their directness. But since when did wild passion bother with the nuances of good writing? Sophie lived far away in America; her messages were forced to stand in for what would have been abundant love-making. Conrad received tens of messages from her at a time. Her crass, half-baked sentences would come together in his mind like one long, enduring orgasm. He would revel in the joy of it, quivering with an almost epileptic ecstasy.

The two also maintained their relationship through Skype sessions. A few times a week, Conrad would drive to a nearby hill, where the Internet was strongest. This wasn't saying much; even on the hilltop, he would have to jostle with his computer for an hour and a half to squeeze out twenty grainy minutes of conversation. When he returned to camp, he would be red-faced and harried, and the paper napkins on the dashboard, substantially diminished.

The next morning, when I opened his computer to enter our data into spreadsheets, his desktop would bear signs of the night's exploits. I would wake up to pictures of Sophie at her skinniest and scantiest. With time, I grew accustomed to seeing her contrived, arachnoid poses. Conrad's commentary, however, never quite ceased to be unsettling.

“Don't you just love those tiny breasts?” he would chirp over my shoulder, staring fondly at the

screen.

“If you say so,” I would reply quietly.

“Don’t tell me you’re not attracted to her!”

“Doesn’t she look a little young for you?”

“She’s not underage, if that’s what you mean. I didn’t break any laws.”

“And you still won’t tell me how you met her?”

“Huh?” he’d mumble. “C’mon, we’ve got a shit-ton of work to do.”

The conversations always ended like this. For all his openness about the details of his cyber-sex life, Conrad was surprisingly guarded when it came to everything else surrounding Sophie. He would feign deafness, mutter about a non-existent workload, send a test tube crashing to the floor. His secrecy extended to other fronts of his life as well. There was a belt of gleaming bullets, each as stout as a thumb, that hung across the warthog bust in the dining room. And there were times late at night, hours after I had retired to my hut, when I would glance up from my book and hear his Land Rover rumble down the driveway. Those occasions always left the belt on the warthog slightly displaced; the following morning, his laptop would remain devoid of Sophie’s nudity. Conrad’s nighttime adventures were never brought up, but one thing about them was perfectly clear. They weren’t Skype calls.

In time, I learned not to ask too many questions. We were boss and assistant on the good days; what happened on the bad days never happened. Conrad was allowed his secrets, as I was

allowed mine.