



INTEGERS *and* ATOMS

A short story by
JENNI WILTZ

KENYA

PRESENT DAY

The dog lay on his side in front of the fireplace, legs extended and toes pointed. He twitched in his sleep, deep tectonic movements that jolted his entire body. He snored through them and drooled onto the rug.

Lucy envied him. The heat from the enormous stone fireplace threatened to dissolve the last shreds of her consciousness. She'd been moving for so long she'd forgotten what it felt like to sit still. Jet lag and the aftereffects of her typhoid vaccine had turned her eyelids into anvils.

"Patricia and Richard will be here soon," Edie said, with an accent as feathered and faint as her lipstick. She handed Lucy a glass of whiskey and water. "This will help settle your stomach."

The alcohol stomped on Lucy's tongue like an angry tap dancer. She swallowed the beat, hoping those pissed-off feet would kick some sense into her. She was in Africa. She had a job to do. She could not journey to one of the farthest corners of the globe and greet it by falling asleep on the floor like a dog. "Thank you," she said.

A flash of headlights shone through the front window. Lucy turned her head away, watching the light streak across the framed artwork on the wall. Cut silhouettes of fleshy faces and shoulders,

colored pencil sketches of flowers, maps of the Njoro River basin, photos of big game hunters on safari—Lucy’s eyes glossed over them as she translated the meaning behind the lights. A car in the driveway. Cars carried people. The dinner guests had arrived.

Her hostess seated herself on the brown leather sofa, drink in hand. Lucy heard footsteps at the door, then the scraping of shoes against the mat. She’d already discovered that the red Kenyan soil got everywhere. Between exiting the cab in the unpaved driveway and marching to Edie’s front door, she’d collected enough clay on the bottoms of her shoes to construct her own tennis court.

A round black shadow darted through the hallway to the front door. It opened the door and accepted the greetings of the two guests. “Hello, Susan,” a deep male voice said. “Lovely to see you again.”

“Here you are, dear,” a female voice said, accompanied by the rustling of slick fabric.

A moment later, a tall couple entered the room. Lucy thought they looked alike, the way dogs and owners sometimes grew to resemble each other as the years passed. The man had broad shoulders and long limbs. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short, with a balding crown that left just enough room for an awkward tweed cap. His wife was also tall and thin. Her wiry gray hair hung almost to her shoulders, curled under at the bottom in a style Lucy remembered from the early ‘80s. Her hands and feet seemed disproportionately large. She wore Birkenstock-style sandals that only accentuated the wideness of her feet.

“Edie, darling!” the woman said, floating over to the couch and sinking into it. “How is everything here? How are Teresa and Will?”

“Fine, fine,” Edie said. “Patricia, Richard, this is Lucy Chernofsky. She’s checking up on Jack’s group over in Nakuru. Lucy, this is Richard and Patricia Hightower. They’ve been here as long as I have, up near Eldoret.”

“Lucy, dear, you look worn out,” Patricia said. “When did you arrive?”

“This afternoon,” Lucy answered.

“That girl’s ready for bed,” Richard said, moving toward the side table and its collection of crystal decanters. “Edie, are you all fixed up? Pat?”

Edie raised her glass. Patricia requested a brandy and water. Richard reached for the decanter filled with the darkest liquor. He brought the glass to his wife and stood beside her, towering over the rest of them. “How was your trip over?” he asked Lucy. “You and Jack are in California, right?”

Lucy nodded. “The trip was fine. My typhoid vaccine made me sick, though.”

“Never had typhoid myself.”

“I see Cecil’s still hanging on,” Patricia said, tilting her head toward the dog.

“He has his good days and bad days,” Edie answered. “That’s his favorite spot.”

“Closest to the heat,” Richard said. “Old bones need heat.”

“His old bones are going to catch on fire,” Edie said. “Sometimes the sparks fly out and singe him, but he doesn’t even wake up. Just goes right on snoring. I don’t know what’s the matter with him.”

Patricia shrugged. “Too old to care, I suppose.”

Edie snorted. “I’d care, if something seemed about to set me on fire.”

“Of course you would, darling.”

Lucy listened as words flew back and forth like tennis balls. No, she thought—more like badminton shuttlecocks. They were lobbed gently, and although they moved swiftly, there was little force behind them. The words were designed for a high loft with minimal impact. It was a game. It had rules. She was not obeying them.

She cleared her throat and tried to think of something to say. She opened her mouth to ask a question about the place the Hightowers were from, but the croaking sound that came out of her mouth was obliterated by the sound of a gong coming from the direction of the kitchen.

“Supper’s ready!” Edie chirped.

“Delightful!” Richard said.

They made their way into the narrow dining room. The stark white walls and dark teak floor reminded Lucy of a monastery. The table was covered with hand-woven lace, full of nubs and uneven patterning, not at all like the machine-produced version Lucy remembered seeing on her mother’s table. A crystal butter dish and salt cellar sat in the middle

of the table, between two silver candle holders holding lit tapers. Each place setting had more utensils than Lucy knew what to do with.

Edie directed Richard to the head of the table and she sat at the foot. Lucy and Patricia shuffled to the sides and pulled out their chairs. Once they were seated, Lucy realized there was no food on the table. There were three drinking glasses laid out in front of her, none of them filled. She stifled a jet-lagged yawn and a growing sense of walking through a dream. It seemed as if Edie, Richard, and Patricia might at any minute pick up their forks and begin to slice non-existent meat or sip non-existent wine.

She saw Edie's arm snake its way through the maze of glassware in front of her place setting. Their hostess snatched up a small silver bell and shook it. Lucy heard a tinny jingle that reminded her of her mother's alarm clock, an ancient metal contraption that didn't work unless it was wound.

A moment later, a plump black woman entered the room with a silver pitcher of water, condensation clinging to the sides. She wore a black dress, white apron, and white cap. Her cocoa-powder skin was smooth and unmarked, her nose wide and flat. Lucy envied her eyelashes, thick without the addition of mascara.

The woman leaned over Richard's shoulder to pour ice water into the tallest, skinniest glass beside his plate. Then she did the same for Patricia and Edie. When she leaned over Lucy, Lucy caught the pungent smell of parched earth and sweat. The white cuffs on her black dress

were brighter than anything Lucy owned. "Thank you," Lucy said.

The woman shuffled back into the kitchen.

Richard picked up his knife and held it to his eyes, as if checking his reflection while pretending to admire the craftsmanship of the silversmith. "Edie, darling, how've you been? Any trouble down your way?"

"Not like you've had," Edie answered. "But Teresa had a man in her backyard last month."

"Armed?"

"They all are."

"Have there been any threats?"

"Always. They've never stopped, you know."

"Notes?" asked Patricia. "That's what we see."

"Oh, yes. And a few other things."

Lucy understood the words they were speaking but could not grasp what they signified. Words like "armed" and "threat" were spoken on the news by men in suits and women in contoured blush that highlighted their cheekbones. She knew what violence was, of course, but the Mexican gangs in her hometown mostly feuded amongst themselves. All she knew of it was the aftermath, the street sign or lamp post against which mourners stacked flowers and rosaries and photos of the deceased. She had never seen a gun and never held a blade.

The plump woman circled back through the room with a crystal decanter. She performed the same ritual, pouring an inch and a half of a

brownish liquid into the smallest glass beside each place setting.

“Edie, darling, are we to have a toast?” Patricia asked.

Edie shook her head. “I’ve had to hire a new chef this week. He’s terrible at making soup, but he was the best that could be found on short notice. If he burns the soup, you must pour the sherry into it. Makes it tolerable.”

Richard held the glass to his nose and sniffed. “Waste of good sherry, isn’t it?”

“We do what we can.”

“I’m sorry, darling.” Patricia smiled and put her hand on top of Edie’s. “We’ve been so lucky up in Eldoret. The same housekeeper and chef for eight years now.”

“Count your silver, all the same,” Edie said. “You never know what they’re up to.”

The black woman stiffened as she poured Lucy’s sherry. The curve of her elbow disappeared, flattening out into the rigid posture of someone wearing a splint.

Lucy’s tired blood roused itself enough to color her cheeks. She thought of her grandfather, a former sailor who called her cousin’s Korean boyfriend a Chinaman. Why, she wondered, did these sorts of insults always happen around a dinner table? If there were no tables in the world, would these sorts of things never be said?

She slumped in her chair, as if the gesture would separate her from the others. The plump woman backed away and took the decanter

back into the kitchen. The air in the dining room felt heavy on Lucy's shoulders.

"Susan," Edie said.

The black woman stopped and turned around.

"Tell Getachew we're ready for the first course."

Lucy kept her eyes on her plate. The glaze on the porcelain had worn unevenly across the surface. In its center, hundreds of tiny lines crazed their way toward the rim. The gold edging was disintegrating, whether by design or by age Lucy did not know.

§

The Hightowers slept in Edie's guest house, down the hill from the main house. It was round, with a roof of palm fronds. In front of it stood the tallest flowering tree Lucy had ever seen, thirty feet high with a riotous mass of pink blossoms. She'd glimpsed it from the driveway, as she walked from the taxi to Edie's front door.

Lucy slept in the main house, in one of its three guest rooms. Small and dark and lined with teak bookcases, it contained a chair, a nightstand, and a double bed. She washed her face in the bathroom down the hall, padded back down the rug-covered floor to her room, and closed the door behind her. Her brain was fogged with images of planes, cabs, and trams; all she wanted was to close her eyes and forget them.

She hadn't wanted to come to Africa at all, but her supervisor's

mother was in the hospital and the twice-yearly visit was a mandatory part of their grant. Edie was an old friend of their director. Although it was illegal, she handled most of their wire transfers and doled out money to African project members for scratch cards and gasoline vouchers. University staff could not be trusted and none of the principal investigators were in Africa year-round. Lucy supposed it was nicer to stay in a home than a hotel, but she found herself longing for the anonymity of room service delivered to a three-digit room number.

She crawled into the bed and pulled the brown cotton comforter over her shoulders. The sheets smelled like camphor. Already she wanted to go home. She wondered where the dog had gone and whether he might find her if she left her door open. The Rhodesian ridgeback was the only creature who obeyed rules she was familiar with. Everyone else spoke a dialect she didn't understand, composed of words that crumbled like clods of dirt when she tried to press the meaning out of them.

She gulped the air to hold down a sob, but even the air felt wrong. It was too thick and didn't circulate properly. It got stuck in her mouth and her throat and could not travel through the tiny passageways of her lungs. She ducked her head under the comforter, squeezed her eyes shut, and realized that out of all of them, only the dog seemed content.



Lucy woke to a knock on her bedroom door. She considered the interruption cruel, based on the number of miles she'd traveled in the past thirty-six hours and the amount of jet lag she'd accumulated. But she was a guest in someone's home, representing both the university and a USAID grant. "Come in," she said, levering one arm over the top of the comforter and brushing hair away from her eyes.

The door opened and Susan shuffled through, carrying a wooden tray. On the tray sat a white teapot and cup. A miniature creamer and sugar dish, complete with tiny brass spoon, made Lucy think of doll furniture. "Miss Edie said you would want tea," Susan said, placing the tray on the chair next to the bed. Her voice was so soft that Lucy had to strain to hear it, just two feet away.

"You don't have to do that for me," she said. "Even if she tells you to."

Susan ignored her. She took the lid off the sugar dish then picked up the teapot and poured the contents into the cup.

"Susan," she said. The name felt strange and furry on her lips. Africa, she decided, turned air into cotton and words into mirages, wavy and rippling and impossible to grasp.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm sorry for the things they said last night."

Susan's hand hovered over the brass spoon. "One lump or two?"

"Is she always like that? Edie, I mean?"

"Do you take milk, ma'am?"

“Susan, stop. I can make my own tea.”

Susan dipped the spoon into the sugar and ferried one lump to the tea cup. She stirred with wide circles, generating a current strong enough to dissolve the sugar. “Ready, ma’am.”

Lucy rubbed her eyes. Maybe the air wasn’t thickened with cotton, she thought. Maybe it was silk, spun into webs that captured words before they reached their destination. “You can talk to me,” she said. “It’s all right.”

Susan lifted the wooden tray from the chair and set it over Lucy’s knees. “Miss Edie says you and Mr. Richard and Mrs. Patricia will go to the market today. She wants to leave in one hour. I’ll collect the tray after you’re gone.” Susan nodded without looking Lucy in the eye. “I will not bring milk tomorrow,” she said, backing away and closing the door behind her.

§

“Do you see that, Lucy?” Edie pointed with one hand and spun the wheel of her Land Rover with the other. “That’s your embassy.”

Richard sat in the front passenger seat. He tilted his long body sideways to get a better view. “Quite restored, I see.”

Lucy frowned. “I don’t see it. What are you pointing at?”

“Oh, darling,” Patricia laughed. “You can’t see it. It’s behind a fence.”

"It's not the same building," Edie said. "It's a new one. They couldn't do anything with the old one."

Lucy stared at the low-slung concrete building. "That's the UN logo."

"No, dear, look across the street."

Lucy swung her head and saw a three-story building with bars over the windows, all painted white. "It looks like a fortress."

"Can't blame them," Edie said. "Someone chucks a heap of dynamite at you, what can you do?"

The Land Rover turned left onto a street that paralleled the embassy complex, rutted with four-inch-deep potholes arranged like pinball stops. Lucy's teeth ached from all the bouncing; she'd meant to have her wisdom teeth pulled before this trip, but after the ten necessary immunizations, she'd lost her willpower to visit any sort of doctor's office again.

From the other end of the street, a small van rocketed toward them. Painted yellow, black, and green in the style of a Jamaican flag, its front grill had gone from a squadron of straight lines to a chevron, smashed by at least one head-on collision. A dozen black heads protruded from a hole cut in the ceiling. Arms and legs hung out the missing side windows. Hip-hop music blared from mounted speakers.

The van's driver swerved from side to side to avoid the potholes, swaying the herd inside. Edie steered the Land Rover to the side and waited for the van to pass. It splashed the Rover with mud and spittle,

flung from the mouths of the riders as they passed. Edie's lips pressed together into a flat line. Along the side of the van, Lucy read the words "Ground Shaker."

"What was that?" she asked, turning in her seat.

"The bus, dear," Patricia answered.

"Matatus," Richard said, shaking his head. "Damned nuisance."

At the end of the street, Edie pointed to an open-air market. Red umbrellas sprouted up from plastic dining tables and chairs, with carefully arranged rocks and water features dotting the paved walkways. "There," she said. "The Masai market."

"Ah," Richard and Patricia breathed.

No one explained what a Masai market was, so Lucy sat back and watched Edie navigate the nearby parking garage. She steered the vehicle into one of the narrow stalls and unlatched her seatbelt. "Lucy, dear, I hope you changed your money at the airport."

"Yes," Lucy said, shuffling behind Edie, Richard, and Patricia on the walkway that led from the parking garage to the market.

"You'll want to stay close, Lucy. The police are out today."

"Police?"

"The ones with guns, dear," Patricia said.

Lucy stared at the market's entrance. Four tall men guarded the walkway, dressed in navy v-neck sweaters, pale blue collared shirts, and navy slacks tucked into black combat boots. Their black berets were embroidered with a crest that featured two lions and two crossed spears.

Each held an assault rifle, the kind Lucy had only seen in movies.

“Don’t look at them,” Edie said, jostling Lucy’s elbow.

“Why not?”

“It gives them ideas.”

Lucy frowned, but allowed herself to be swept forward into the square. The guns were alarming, but surely the men weren’t allowed to use them on just anybody? Not in this day and age, when a blatant assault to democracy would surely appear on YouTube within seconds, recorded by someone’s cell phone camera. Perhaps the guns weren’t even loaded. She remembered an episode of a TV drama where the hero had spray painted a fluorescent green water pistol black, erasing all evidence of its uselessness.

“Edie,” Patricia said. “Is this the market everyone talks about?”

“No, that’s the one downtown. This one isn’t as popular. It’s for locals, really.”

“That’s certainly you, darling.”

Lucy glanced around the square. Dozens of vendors squatted in makeshift stalls with merchandise laid out in front of them on the ground or on a blanket. Shoppers walked up and down the rows, pointing and asking for prices. Many of the vendors were women, wearing stacks of brightly colored bead necklaces and heavy earrings that stretched and swung their lobes. After the bleakness of Edie’s guest room, the market was a mirage, constructed of color instead of vapor rays.

Thick beaded collars and bracelets hung on carved mannequin

heads. Lucy imagined their tightly woven geometric designs represented a vanished language, with bends sinister and saltires conveying words or the names of places she would never see. Painted tribal masks saluted the sun, some with antlers and some with the headdresses that reminded her of an Egyptian pharaoh. She saw a number of display racks showcasing the orderly stripes of plaid blankets. Just like Scottish tartans, she thought. Somewhere, she heard the beat of inexperienced palms upon a ceremonial drum.

“Is there anything in particular you wish to buy?” Patricia asked.

“I don’t know,” Lucy said. “Can’t I just go look at it all?”

“Don’t pay more than 100 shillings for anything,” Edie said.

“How much is 100 shillings?”

Patricia placed one large hand on her husband’s arm. “Richard, go with her.”

“Do,” Edie agreed. “They’ll rob her blind, the poor thing. Patricia and I will wait for you by the umbrellas. You didn’t want to buy anything, did you, Pat?”

Patricia demurred and the two women retreated into the shade. Richard made a gallant mock-bow and adjusted his tweed cap. “At your service, my dear.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said, the first ripple of excitement prickling beneath her skin. She stepped toward the nearest row of vendors and stopped in front of a batik-swathed man selling painted ceramic chessboards. “Look,” she said to Richard.

The vendor smiled at her, revealing three gaps left by missing teeth, each rounded at the top by the coffee-colored arch of his gums. The arc was so perfect it reminded Lucy of a medieval cathedral. “Jambo,” the man said.

“Jambo,” Lucy said, returning his welcome.

He held his dark hand over a stack of chessboards. It hovered there like a divining rod until he nodded and slid out a board painted in purple and gray. “Play?”

“I don’t know how,” Lucy said. “But I’d like to learn.”

The man reached down onto the blanket that delineated the boundaries of his stall. He picked up a small figurine and held it up for her. “Ndlopfu,” he said.

Lucy reached forward to grasp the figurine, then stopped herself. “May I?”

The man nodded and she plucked it from his hand. It was one of the chess pieces—an elephant, carved atop a tiered base. Its ears flared, great equilateral flaps whose points faced downward. Lucy saw hundreds of lines traced across its skin, replicating the loose folds of its saggy knees and striated trunk. “Ndlopfu,” he said again.

“Did you carve this?”

The man nodded, swiping his closed fist against his palm to pantomime the act of whittling. Lucy wondered if he worked from memory or from a photograph. She looked at the skin around his eyes, broken into a delta of thin lines, and thought she knew the answer.

“Which piece do you think it is?” she asked Richard, holding it up on her palm.

“A king, I’d say. Those ears look like St. Edward’s crown.”

Lucy pointed at the basket that held the rest of the board’s playing pieces. “Can I see another?”

The vendor reached down into the bag and pulled out a smaller piece. It was one of the big cats, perched on a tiered base with its head lowered and lips curled in a snarl. Lucy studied it, wondering how the man had made the animal look so fierce. The eyes, she thought, slanted like a quarter-moon. “Chui,” the man said.

Lucy looked up at Richard. “What does that mean?”

“Leopard. Magnificent creatures. Lie about in trees all day.”

“Which piece is this one, do you think?”

“Bared teeth,” he said, tapping it in her palm. “It’s a knight.”

She passed the leopard back to the vendor. “I’ll buy it.”

As she drew her hand back, a thick black hand shot out and grabbed her arm. The sweat of a strange palm greased her skin as it slid down her forearm and latched onto her wrist. It jerked her away from Richard.

The man was no taller than she, but weighed twice as much. Half of that weight seemed to be in his head. Lucy saw a rectangular face with a high forehead and a thick walrus neck. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and white pants, with neck and wrists shackled in ropes of beads and golden chains. He held her so tightly against him that she could feel a roll of flesh breaking over the waistband of his pants.

“You like chessboards?” he asked. His smile revealed white teeth and a sherbet-colored tongue. “I can get the best price for you, ma’am. Right over here, chess sets crafted by the finest artisans, with only the best materials. Come with me, yes?”

He pivoted on the ball of his foot, turning her away from Richard with the grip and fluidity of a ballroom dancer. The arm he’d wrapped around her slipped down to her waist. His fingers inched into her pants pockets, like worms rounding blind corners and gouging their way into the earth.

“No!” she cried. “Let me go! Stop!”

Richard reached for Lucy’s other arm, grasping it tightly just below her elbow. “Bugger off,” he said to the gold-draped man. “The lady says she doesn’t want to go with you.”

“She wants a good price,” the man said. “I give it to her.”

“No!” Lucy said, digging her elbow into the man’s side. She felt only flesh, malleable mounds that shifted to absorb the impact of her elbow. “Let me go or I’ll scream!”

“But you like chess sets, no?”

His fetid sweat enveloped her, bringing back the nausea caused by the typhoid vaccine. Lucy clenched her teeth. “I can feel your hand in my pocket. Let me go or I’ll scream ‘thief’ and run straight for the police.”

“You would not.”

“I will.”

“They will not help you.”

“They will once they know you’re trying to rob me.”

“Lucy, don’t,” Richard said.

“What?” She swung her head towards him.

“You don’t understand. We can’t make a scene here. Nothing good comes of it.” Richard’s eyes were bright, floating in the sand of his dust-colored face. He blinked and the brightness dissolved into waves. A mirage, she thought.

“Listen to your friend,” the gold-draped man said. “He knows how things work.”

“No,” Lucy said, shaking her head. “It’s not right.”

The man laughed at her and slipped his fingers further into her pocket. She felt them shovel against her hip through the thin fabric of her pocket.

“It’s not right,” she said again. Then she opened her mouth and screamed.

The gold-draped man growled and scooped her pocket with his cupped fingers. Then he shoved her away.

Richard caught her as she fell against him. “Lucy, stop it!” he hissed. “You’re making too much noise!” He looked over his shoulder toward the entrance to the market, his face paling beneath its light dusting of beard. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

Lucy squeezed her stomach muscles and forced every thick particle of air out of her lungs. So this is how they move it around, she thought. This is the only way. The air spilled out of her like blood, thick and

metallic. For one moment, she was herself again, with nothing of Africa in her. She was light again and free.

Then her heart slowed, protesting the lack of oxygen. She closed her mouth, unwilling to taste its thick cotton wadding in her throat again. Her weightless body sank against Richard's chest. She had always believed that weightless things rose.

Richard tightened his grip on her arm. "Breathe," he said. "Come on, girl."

Lucy breathed, but only because the alternative was dissolving into the red clay earth beneath her feet. All around her, panicked vendors reached for the corners of their blankets, gathering their wares into transportable packets that could be slung over a shoulder. Frightened shoppers jostled them as they fled, pushing Lucy against Richard's chest.

"We can't stay," Richard said. "Hurry."

Lucy swallowed heavily. "Why is everyone running away? That man was a thief!"

"Walk back to Edie and Patricia. Say nothing." He kept a firm grip on her arm as they pushed through the crowd. Lumpy blanket sacks slammed into her as vendors twisted and turned, ferretting their way out of the market.

In front of them, the four armed men marched into the square, weapons held over their heads. One of them squeezed the trigger, sending a burst of semi-automatic rounds into the air. Women shrieked. The crowd ducked and scattered, clearing space around the policemen as

if they were oil dropped into a pool of water, unable to mix, unable to be absorbed.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“They heard you,” Richard said.

“But that man tried to rob me! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“It doesn’t matter, darling. You were there.”

She looked back toward the chessboard vendor, but his narrow stall was empty. The blanket covering his patch of ground had already been gathered up and carted away. She looked at the rush of bobbing sacks, flooding out the other side of the market. She would never be able to find him.

Lucy turned back to Richard. “I didn’t want this,” she moaned.

“You,” a policeman shouted, advancing toward them. He held the gun at a forty-five degree angle across his body. Bend sinister, she thought. She looked at his fingers where they held the gun. The skin was glassy, as if it had been buffed to a shine. Strangely smooth in parts and wrinkled like an elephant in others, it looked as if the outside of his skin were just the clear casing for the black flesh underneath.

She stepped backward until she felt Richard’s chest at her back. He gripped her arms and held her in front of him.

“You,” the policeman said again, pointing the muzzle at her. The whites of his eyes had a yellow cast to them, like the fog that shrouded a ghost in a children’s cartoon. “I heard a white woman’s scream. Was it you?”

Lucy forced her throat to close on the pool of hot saliva in her mouth. A white woman's scream? she thought. What had been done to the women here to make them scream so many times that this man knew their race simply by the sound of their fear?

"Lucy, dear," Richard said. "If you could just—"

The policeman grabbed Richard's shirt with one hand and shoved him against the wall. Richard held up his hands in surrender. The man turned his yellow eyes back to her.

Lucy swallowed the saliva caught in her throat. She thought about the policemen at home. They had names like Jones or Fernandez, and one of them had helped her when her tire went flat on the way to work.

This man did not have a name, not one she was allowed to know. No brass nameplate, no identifying insignia. He was everything that could be said or believed or done. That's when she remembered—all things came from Africa. The tools, the lore, the languages, the marrow in her bones. Human life itself had originated here, pulled out of a scar deep within the earth. If it existed in the hearts of men, somewhere here there was a blueprint for it. Even evil.

"No," she said, feeling something die inside her.

The policeman blinked. He used the butt of his gun to push past her.



The flowering tree in front of the guest cottage drew bumblebees to it, black and furry and as big as strawberries. They flew up to the deck of the main house and buzzed around the coffee tray in Susan's arms. The flap of their wings sounded like a deck of cards being shuffled. Lucy ducked low in her seat, afraid to be stung. She had never seen anything with wings that large that wasn't a bird.

"Set the tray down, Susan," Edie said. Susan obeyed and backed away, standing beside the sliding glass door. Edie reached for the French press and poured a golden-edged teacup full of coffee. She handed it across the table to Lucy.

"Our Miss Lucy performed like a champ," Richard said, raising his glass in a salute.

"Indeed," Edie said.

Lucy looked at the weathered boards of the deck floor, at the dog sleeping beneath Edie's feet. Several drips of coffee had fallen onto his back; he didn't move. She watched his long-lashed eyes blink slowly. His mouth lay open slightly, long pink tongue lolling between pointed canines. A bumblebee zipped past him and he closed his eyes.

Lucy looked up at Susan. She seemed to disappear against the dark background of the screen door. Only her white collar and cuffs stood out, bright geometric beacons silhouetted against Edie's living room. Lucy looked at her arms. They were locked stiffly in place.

"Are you still upset, dear?" Patricia asked.

"Yes," Lucy answered.

“Don’t let it get to you. It’s all integers and atoms.”

Edie handed Patricia the next cup of coffee. “That’s an odd thing to say.”

Patricia shrugged. “Must have read it somewhere. Sounds pretty, though, doesn’t it?”

“What on earth do you think it means?”

“I’m not sure, really. But it sounds like all the things that get in the way.”

Lucy looked at her cup. She felt that she had failed some vital test, something required of her to be a human being. Her soul felt smaller than it had on the plane. I still don’t know how to play chess, she thought.

“Lucy, dear, I forgot to ask,” Edie said, holding the small brass spoon between her middle finger and her thumb. “Do you take sugar?”

Lucy opened her mouth to say she could do it herself, but the thick air choked her. She cleared her throat. “Yes,” she said. “Two lumps, please.”

THE END

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Reality Bites

In 2004, I traveled to Kenya. At the time, I worked for a sustainable livestock grant program. Imagine my surprise when they let me see one of the projects in action! Much of what Lucy sees is based on my experience, minus the scary altercation. I stayed in the home of a British Kenyan woman, a friend of the program director. I went to the Maasai Market. I bought that chess set with carved animals for pieces. Now if only I knew how to play chess...

About the Author



Jenni Wiltz writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She has won national writing awards for romantic suspense and creative nonfiction. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals including *Gargoyle* and *The Portland Review*, as well as several small-press anthologies. When she's not writing, she enjoys sewing, running, and genealogical research. She lives in Pilot Hill, California. Visit her online at JenniWiltz.com.