

Black Sugar

Home

The house where I live is deep in the woods. The driveway is overgrown with moss. A defiant mushroom has pushed up through the tar where the drive meets the street. How its roots wound their way under and up, I cannot imagine. It is ready to pick, or poison.

The flutter of wings startles me, and a red-tailed hawk lands on a branch of the tree to my left. I wait to see if he sees me. His chest is puffed forward, and his head is still, but his eyes blink lazily. I stand still, to see what he will do next. His wings are partly outstretched when he falls, dips, and rises to land on an evergreen to my right.

“Hi, Dad,” I say. There is a look of recognition, as he winks, or perhaps that is what I see, not what happens. As then he is up, flying, the gold tail-feathers flashing in the sun.

My father was a large man, six feet tall, green eyes, an open face. Quite handsome. Paul Newman, only heavier, muscular, larger.

There were three falls; one in the bedroom, the second in the bath, the final one on a porch, down stairs. The broken hip (not really the hip—more the top of the thigh), had been joined back together with screws. It was during that operation that MRSA, a strep infection, took hold and spread.

In the wheelchair, my father could travel from the medical wing, where nurses kept him at night, to the apartment he shared with my Mom. He had to be watched; as he wasn't allowed to walk on the leg, but if no one was looking, he ignored the red clicker marked HELP, and walked to the bathroom himself. It was such a short distance, he said.

A psychologist pulled me aside and told me my father could not return home until he and my mother stopped fighting. “He doesn’t mean anything by it,” I said to him, my mother’s words. The myth again, repeated over and over: OK for *him* to be angry—he’s a man—a Colonel, USMC.

Semper Fi.

The doctor took the screws out of my father and put in a fistful of antibiotics shaped like a stone. After this, in the ICU, a nurse heard my Dad yelling at me.

“Don’t talk to your daughter like that!” she told him.

“What did you say?” he replied, trying to lean forward. “Do you want to repeat that, young lady?”

She turned to see the fierce look in his eyes. “I must have misunderstood,” she said.

“That’s better,” he said to her, glaring at me.

“*No apology needed,*” I thought.

My father’s last days were filled with confusion: mistaking a porch near his window for a garage, calling the doctor “Lieutenant,” and thinking the hospital was a hotel.

He was able, finally, to fly away from all that.

It is morning, three months after he died, when I lift the covers to block out the light. Curled on my side, my fists pressed to my cheeks, my legs together, I sink, spiraling down to a place where I disappear. The cat comes to rest on my hip, marking me as if she is a sentry standing over the wounded or dead. The warmth of her body curled on mine is a signal, a beacon, but as it is the only thing I feel, it means nothing.

In the comic strip of the past, there is frame after frame of empty pockets, torn resumes, and dislodged sidewalk grates. My car registration blows out the window, and raccoons drag a large bag of dog food from the garage to the yard in the middle of the night, leaving the crushed empty paper sack behind, torn and empty.

My marriage is full of complaints: soap residue on the white tile kitchen counter, there are ants, trash hasn't been emptied, we're out of cream. Don't tell me about it. He does.

A blizzard drops twenty-four inches of snow, and the week after that twelve more. When the plow comes and clears the drive, the skies open again, and the flakes pile up for another eight. The snow does not blanket the ground—it buries the last layer of white. The bare limbs of stiff trees bend and reach, simulating windmills.

With a laptop propped on a pillow, I search “Study Abroad,” as if I was 18, not 40, crossing off Asia and Europe, and settling on:

CAMP
(Care of Manatees and Primates)
Room and Board
\$600/month
4 months minimum

In my savings, there is money to pay someone so I can work for them. James answers my email with his: they are usually booked in advance, but have more work than expected. I can come right away, Pay-Pal accepted, check website for details:

It's a British couple, James and Paula, and they're in Belize, near the Pacific, not far from the park Laminae. Bring a T-shirt for swims in the pool with the manatee—the smell will never come out. Long sleeves are required to feed monkeys: they bite. Bug spray, lots of bug

spray, it's expensive. A headlamp for walking on paths at night is strongly recommended—rattlers choose clearings to rest.

My mother decides this trip is the end of my marriage, and pleads with me not to go. Her way was to stay with her husband. She agrees not to tell what I tell her, and I mention that there are no phones, not even snail mail. If I find a town with those, I'll write.

I drop my bag on the curb of Belize City airport, and maneuver to stand in the shade. The cab driver, oblivious to the merciless sun, asks where I am going in English (In Belize, I learn, the locals speak English, Spanish, and Creole).

“Bus stop to Lemon-noy,” I say.

The man smiles. The way I pronounce the name is a joke, his expression conveys. He finds Old Airport Road, and looks for Persimmon Street, or is it Peccadillo or Pineapple or Presumptuous. A woman shouts to him from her yard that it's further north, and I see that my choices are that, or south (I thought I was to go west, towards the ocean. I'm lost).

We find a street called Persimmon. It is marked as somewhere else on the map emailed to me from CAMP. As it turns out, on earth, not cyberspace, Persimmon is not across from the Shell, and there are no Bus Stop signs, only bunkers where you can wait. There's a structure made of concrete—four columns, stone bench, rock roof, and a square inch of shadow in the back.

“What if the bus does not come?” the driver asks me as I get out. I don't answer. I have a plan A, a plan AA, even plan AAA, but no plan B. He points, signaling I am on the wrong side of the road.

A bus roars by without stopping, dust billowing up beneath its rusting frame. The shelter is covered with a fresh film of powder, which settles in place, blending with the surface as it disappears. The eighty-six degree heat is welcome. It is dry heat, and I do not sweat. I am thirsty.

In the distance, there are no houses, only the one dirt road, and wide fields dotted with an errant bush here and there. A book in my pack opens to a tale: The Mayan king was a proud man, a leader, the ruler of all the lands. His teeth were rotten, and he whined and groaned 'til two princes approached him with a cure: *Pull the teeth and replace them with corn. You'll feel much improved.* The king agreed, and the teeth were pulled. When the people saw his transformation—sunken cheeks, tiny jaw—they turned away. Where was the commanding king they once knew? This deformed old man was not he. The king hid himself from his people.

He lost face.

The road is a lonely band disappearing from sight. It will be all right, I think, after today. It is late evening, the sky muddy and black, when the blue bus with the blue line stops. My head grazes the window which is splattered on the outside with mud.

To the right, smoke rises, a torrent in the night, vicious, and ugly. The fire is out of control, or is it, a vast pile of flames raging, tearing up lifeless bands of cane. The smell of sugar burning is faint, not sweet, enticing, not acrid, a scent somewhere between a spice and an oil such as musk. As the black pile burns hotter, the evening sky fills with broken ash and raw bits of something, dead rattlers maybe, or coral snakes. Outside, there is no one in sight near the reptile-filled piles of brush—instead field after field of desolate, partly-cut sugar-cane covered in vines and a winding, terrifying tangle hiding every danger.

The bus is full of the young, their young mothers, and a few men traveling from work to one of the villages up river. The large steel can is reminiscent of a school bus I took many years ago in Virginia, except it is completely dark, so I can barely see those sitting nearby. The windows are split in half and slide down, or up, and the seats are covered in torn leather with the insides sticking out. The constant chatter is a dialect I don't understand—Creole-Spanish maybe—and the people are all dark-haired with tan skin, dressed in brown pants, in spite of the heat.

The bus makes a sharp right, and I watch the pyre from the side. There's no water, no bucket, no hose, and nobody watching. The fire burns to an unmarked edge of a clearing, roaring towards heaven, sparks flying higher, dotting the rising cloud with specs, fireflies dancing in the night.

I turn away towards two faces, inches away, two girls. One is pretty, her young face shadowed, a golden brown, a red blush in her cheeks, dark eyes, and her dark curly hair bounces as she wiggles back and forth.

"Hi," I say. "What's your name?"

"Elena," is what I think she says. Her friend imitates the way she turns, kneeling backwards in the seat so that her face is inches from mine.

"And what is your name?" I ask.

"Marci," she says, her head tilting left, then right.

The girls are on top of each other with Elena near the window, and when the bus hits a bump and she loses her grip on the back of the seat, I lean forward and place my hand near her face so her head doesn't bang into glass.

"Do you know a song?" she asks me. Her friend looks at her, nodding, liking the question.

"I don't know. Do *you*?" I say.

Marci smiles and turns to her friend, and they clap hands, their own, then each other's rhyme. "*Here comes a lady with the African music. First she does the cha-cha. Then she does the twist.*" The girls bounce up and down in the seat, moving their hips in a timid suggestion of a dance.

"Now you," Elena says to me.

I put my hands up, and clap, slapping my right hand to hers, then my left. When I make a mistake, missing a beat, they laugh, and I join in, laughing with them. We are shouting to be heard above the chatter on the bus and the loud clanking noise of gears changing as the driver skirts potholes and ditches.

Elena leans forward towards me, arching her body over the back of her seat to wrap her arms around my neck, nearly catapulting into my lap. "You are beautiful," she says in the dark.

"You're beautiful too," I say.

Her hands are in my hair, rubbing back and forth, up and down.

The bus grinds to low gear, and a fluorescent light running the length of the bus, flickers on. The girls' eyes widen as they get their first full look at me.

"Awwwww," Elena wails.

"Ugg," Marci says, taking in the mass of tangled hair on my head. "You're ugly!"

Elena shrinks back, letting her hands fall to her side. "You're ugly," she says to me, parroting her friend.

I let out a belly laugh, the loudest one in months. "I'm ugly?" I manage to ask in between laughing. "I'm ugly," I say again, this time in a tone of acceptance. I have white skin and green eyes, and I'm wearing shorts. Yes, I'm ugly.

The bus doors open, and a passenger makes his way down the stairs. The girls lean precariously across the back of their seat again.

"You're beautiful," Marci says to me.

"In the dark," I tell her.

It is another cab drive through the dark down a much rougher road. I can barely make out a lagoon on the right, and banana trees near a low stucco house. Inside, there is a stone floor and a large table next to a kitchen. Paula greets me, smiling broadly, saying how happy she is I am here. She is petite, with gray hair pulled back in a bun. Her batik aqua-blue dress nearly touches the floor. She lifts up a bedsheet hung loosely over a bamboo rod and shows me my cot, in the pantry right off the kitchen, and I drop, exhausted, without unpacking or eating.

As I close my eyes, I see the girls on the bus clapping hands. Their faces are in my head while I sleep.

In the night there is a howl in the distance, a monster maybe, coming closer. It pierces the silence in a wild screech of loneliness and despair. It is too dark for me to go look for the creature. If he is wounded or needs my help, the animal will have to wait.

A breeze comes through a narrow screen near the ceiling. Rain falls in sweeps across the expanse of jungle. A rooster crows, a cacophony follows—twigs snapping, leaves rustling, noses pushing up dirt—wild animals gathering, scuffling, and ranging for shrubs. The

temperature drops, and I lean to the floor to find the rolled-up sleeping bag, and hug it to my chest.

The cry is back again, and I venture into the dawn—a rosy sky peeking across the lagoon—to find the male, the howler, the monkey who is so loud. He is at the end of a path, easy to find, directly behind a stone hut, housed in a wood and wire enclosure. When he sees me approach, he stops crying, races to the top of his cage, and hangs from a beam. I put my face near the crisscross of the frame, and he shows me his thick coat and long tail. His throat is large, like a tumor, and he howls again, pointing his nose to the sky. The deep roar is the strongest I've heard from an animal, tame or wild.

His cry is repeated by others, many others, hidden somewhere in a thicket of tall jungle trees. He cries again, and the others listen and call to him once more, as if to say, "Come."

A few hours later that day, I am introduced by Paula to a woman who makes my schedule. She tells me to pick grapefruit, take garbage out to the pigs, feed the chickens. Make sure the manatees swim back and forth in their pools.

The edge the swimming enclosure for Kaylee, the large manatee, is covered in slime. Before I have a chance to think about why, my feet are in it, and Kaylee is there, her whiskered face above water, her eyes squinting, her nose and mouth searching for me. A flipper traces one eye, underlining a line that is there, and I wonder if she is signaling a hide and seek game to me. Where is she going to hide in this walled pool of green, not even deep enough for a man to dive into safely. I ease deeper and further, trusting I won't scare her, as the bottom is coated in green. I shuffle my rubber shoes back and forth, dancing for her. She nudges the back of my heel as if to say go faster, but my kicking unnerves her, so I lean on the mattress, the float someone made

from a shorty wetsuit inflated from the inside, a man with no arms and legs—what is he called?
Bob?

Bob holds me up out of the water that has floating things in it, white chalk-colored doo. I am thankful it isn't brown, but perhaps it is white because all Kaylee eats is formula from a bottle four times a day. Other campers build a fire at night in the furnace next to the pool, stoking it with wood from the jungle.

I tiptoe through the murky ooze and wait for the oversized bubble to surface, showing me where she is on her dive. I don't see her, and worry that she has been down too long. I hear the hiss of her nostrils, and there, under my left arm, are her eyes looking me in the face, nose twitching as if she is an elephant laughing at me. She moves her tongue and her lips as if she is munching on something; a thought about hide and seek.

Kaylee finds my toe inside the shoe and takes it into her mouth; nibbling at the end, gently gnawing. I hop on the other leg backwards so that she keeps my foot in her mouth.

A week later, they come to me, James and Paula, and say, "Did you notice anything different, because Kaylee defecated all over the place?" They look at my quizzical face and James says, "Oh sometimes it builds up for a while. Could be that."

It is important to not talk too much, to yourself, the animal, or each other in front of them, they tell me. No shouting. Your opinion doesn't matter. Learning the sizes of bowls isn't rocket science. Do not go near the monkey enclosure unless asked, and do not put a palm frond inside—it might be contaminated. You ask too many questions. Are you determined to stir things up?

Do not sing to the manatee.

When I am in the water with her, I whisper, "I love you, Kaylee."

As the days become longer, February turns into March. I follow instructions, cutting fruit, arranging small metal bowls, raking palm leaves, and filling bottles and vials with powdered milk.

The dog named Sally is thin, brown, and wiry, and I watch as she skips and bounds across the lawn. She pounces on a wedge, and it catapults into the air, end over end, like a badly aimed football, except this toy is thin and brown ; a boomerang, only smaller, and curved like a "C." It wobbles haphazardly through the air as if purposeless, but the dog dances towards it, leaping, landing on one end, so it flips like a lopsided rake, taking off through the air again. I catch up to Sally, but she runs , ignoring my interest in her, swiping at the missile a second before it lands, and I watch as the toy zigs in a second circle back towards the house. It is only the split side of a coconut shell, aerodynamic by nature, and light enough to entice an intelligent dog to use it like a spring.

Sally lies in the path at night, when it's cooler. I step over her, and sing, "*Lay down Sally,*" out loud. "*And rest you in my arms. Don't you think you want someone to talk to.*"

Clapton. Wish he was here.

The light from my travel alarm is all I need to find the saw on the front porch. Someone has tied it to the end of a pole with tape, and it wobbles. That's not important, I think, as I need to cut only one leaf this last time. The four months are up. Kaylee was moved from a lagoon

enclosure to a full release to the wide open bay. She returns now and then for more food. It is my job to find her some before dawn.

Around me, they circle, the bugs. They are on me, finding ankles, then wrists. Some of them wait for their vicious attack 'til I reach up with both hands on the pole. I can only guess how to find the twelve-foot-high leaf in the dark, that one with the luscious stalk.

I move the saw back and forth, hearing the sound of the rusted teeth pick into the green of the tree. One, two, three—it's not easy, the frond being up so high, and it's hard to cut with a saw that keeps slipping. The big leaf drops, thumping down, like a sail collapsing in wind. It is still hanging there by a thread. I need the light once more, and yes, of course, here they are—the mosquitoes. This time they find a damp place on the back of my neck where I can't watch them feast.

The sleeping porch is quiet, and I lift the leaf high so it does not drag on the ground and give me away. It will be hours before they look for me, maybe a day; they might not look at all. No need for wading shoes—I'll be over the rocks in a second. She is waiting for me, her nose at the surface, her eyes on the path. She has returned from the larger lagoon in the night. Does she want this leaf right away? I throw it into the water and push it so it floats, making a hiding place for her on the surface.

Kaylee dives underneath to prove she knows the large leaf is a toy and her food. Her walrus-like body looms up from the deep so quickly, I am nearly afraid of her strength.

The water is cool, not cold, and I slip down, staying close to the fence on the left. She dives and rolls, so that in semi-darkness, I am able to watch her turn and see her line of a mouth looking so much like a smile. She hides beneath the leaf again, and I understand her game, and

stay well away, walking in a wide circle. She is behind my legs, near the bottom, bumping the back of my ankle, pushing me.

That's when I take the large leaf and swim through the gate.

There's no beach in a mangrove swamp. The thick roots of the bush are like spiders; they crawl through the water, weaving sand and mud to spread surreptitiously, spinning a larger and larger web. We kick away from the shore, Kaylee and I. I have the banana frond, and she follows, swooping under it, coming up under my arm. Her fin does not rub underneath her eye—small lagoon fish ate the parasites off her skin. She is healthy, and heavy—nearly four hundred pounds. As the water gets deeper, I search with my fingertips for grass, pulling it up from the bottom. It's a simple task to weave separate clumps of seaweed roots together.

A chain of grass near the surface is appealing to her, and there she is, grabbing and eating it, saving the leaf for last, I assume.

In deep water, Kaylee races away to the right. I imagine her finding the surface again, in the distance, near the ocean to the east. The morning light is a scar on the horizon, barely there. Three or four hummocks where mangroves have gathered together have trapped enough sand to attract the roots of small trees. Not quite enough land for margays or panthers, not yet.

It is still shallow enough to stand, but I swim instead, kicking, pulling at the sand on the bottom with my hands. Biting into the stalk of the leaf, I pretend to carry it with me, but the taste of rainwater trapped inside is delicious, and I eat it, thinking it is like celery or fennel. I left my water bottle, along with my other possessions, behind, and I finish the last few inches of stalk and try a tip of the leaf, spitting it out right way. As I pass the first hummock, I stop, and not seeing Kaylee, I leave the leaf behind and swim again towards the place I think she might be. The water is deep, deep enough for her to turn and dive, and yet, she is nowhere in sight.

After swimming a while, I find a patch of grey mud to paint my face and arms. The silt is made up of fine, miniscule grains. The faint yellow inch of light from across the lagoon allows me to see where to cover my skin completely. The paste is warmer than water, and I pat and smooth it until the wounds from the bugs and the scars from the past dissipate and dissolve, and I swim again towards the thin white line in the distance.
