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CHIGGERS

SOUNDS OF PAIN REACH THROUGH the dark. A small animal must be caught in a trap on the other side of the bedroom. To escape, it will have to gnaw through bone that sharp metal teeth already crunch. It will have to leave a limb behind. Survival has a price, every mangled body says.

The whimpering travels from my brother's bed, on the far side of our sister's. It's MJ who moans. "What's wrong?" I ask the darkness, as if it knows the reason for all distress voiced within its sphere. The room falls silent. MJ wants me to think he's sleeping. He'd like me to believe this is just a dream. Beyond the window another Morogoro midnight swarms. Insect rustle from outside fills the void caused by my brother's quiet. Lily must also be listening to MJ struggle to remain mute. My sister must hear him trying to hide how much it hurts. The effort is deafening. A stifled scream swells.

"You don't take aspirin in Africa," chuckles my father when Lily proposes this for MJ's first serious headache. It occurs within a month of our arrival to Morogoro from Brale, BC—via several years of apparently aimless wandering across seemingly random swathes of the globe. According to Mitch, Western medicine has no effect on the Ngondo hills; illness lies beyond reach of pharmaceuticals here. Let the damn Brits swallow what their quacks claim will prevent malaria, dysentery, typhoid. Mitch's gang is tough as any out of his thirties childhood on the east side of Regina. We can adapt to everything, MJ, Lily and me. We'll survive anywhere. MJ will buck up before we know it.

The headaches continue. During butterfly hunts in the jungle above the mission, MJ slips away from Lily and me. We will find him resting in the cinder-block house when we descend with our nets. In the bedroom doorway we blink until his shape emerges out of dimness. Lily inspects MJ's peaked face with the same fascination she shows for the boa constrictor

for sale in the market in town. You can always tell how much she wants to poke a stick through the mesh, jab at the coiled length inside the cage, make the fat snake strike. Lily feels MJ's forehead. She holds his wrist to count his pulse then commands me to run to the kitchen for a cool, damp cloth. My brother's eyes won't open. He will not say how much his head hurts; if the pain's better or worse. Our offer to read aloud from *Robinson Crusoe* is rejected and a glass of sugar water is declined. Lily becomes bored by such an unresponsive patient. "He wants to be alone," she decides, searching the cupboard for firefly jars. It's almost dusk. Flickering bits of colour will soon decorate the darkness above our reach. In Africa, we're always trying to catch hold of something.

At the village beyond the mission, Mitch squats in the dust with toothless men after his teaching day is over. He practices Swahili slang and soaks up tribal wisdom and consults about MJ's condition. These old fellows surely know of a plant that can be ground into powder or distilled into a tincture to cure his boy. Some root, blossom, leaf. Or a spell will stop MJ's screams from slicing the darkness. The incantation of a crone, say, who lives in a solitary hut at the end of a path that twists through elephant fronds, Paradise vines, clouds of purple moths. Her flinty throat strikes sparks of sound; gnarled hands conjure amid smoke. My brother's pain is invited to release itself into the charcoal air to be diffused into an ache shared by all who breathe here.

My father shakes his head when the old village fellows won't help his boy from fear their secret cure will end up another colonial appropriation. The damn Brits have ruined Africa for everyone.

MJ's moaning seems to begin a little earlier each night, until it starts before anyone has a chance to fall asleep. The disturbance drives Mitch to his room at the other end of the cinder-block house. He can't stand to see his children suffer; he can't bear hearing any of them cry. His record player spools Frank Sinatra through the dark while Lily presses a fresh cloth against my brother's forehead. Her index finger traces the swollen vein on his left temple. Purple blood beats, purple blood can't get out. MJ's lashes flutter with each pulse. They're dark as his hair remains. Tanzania bleaches Lily's and my heads almost white.

What boils and seethes inside MJ each night seeps out to soak his sheets just before dawn. The bedroom smells cloyingly sweet by day. A piece of ripe fruit might have split open on the cement floor to begin decomposing instantly, swiftly. When the sickly scent has faded, my father appears in the doorway to ask how his gang is coming along. "MJ will buck up for good before we know it," he guarantees again. "Just wait and see." Mitch used to urge us, with the same force of conviction, to wait for our mother to buck up and join us from Canada. The quacks won't let go of her, he would explain bitterly when Ardis ended up staying at the other side of the world. Today, despite everything, Mitch still knows exactly what to do. He'll shimmy up the paw-paw tree by the north veranda. He'll risk his neck to bring a remedy far more effective than aspirin down to earth for his oldest boy. Lush orange-red flesh will be the ticket for what ails MJ. An elixir for us all. Africa isn't the disease, Africa is the cure.

My brother's headaches subside during the rainy season, when the tin roof pounds in place of his skull. Drumming water substitutes for drumming blood. Subdued by the din, MJ, Lily and I play quietly inside while beyond the window screen red dirt hemorrhages downhill. Untouched correspondence lessons accumulate in a corner. Mitch no longer asks what we've been up to that day when he returns from teaching. Maybe Africa isn't working out as he planned. MJ, Lily and I begin another round of the Somewhere game as the clamour on the roof becomes joined by pots clanging in the kitchen. It's Rogacion. The houseboy stopped cleaning our bedroom, or entering it at all, at an early point in the progression of MJ's headaches. He's given all of us three children wide berth ever since, as though we are equally contaminated or cursed.

Rogacion is spreading false stories about us through the village, according to Mitch's sources there. "The damn Brits sure did a fine job on the fellow," my father comments, when our houseboy won't squat with him in the dirt for a frank man-to-man talk. What Rogacion alleges could only occur in the cinder-block house at night, after he makes our supper then goes home to the village, when he's not there.

The rain ends, the headaches return. Each one leaves my brother paler and quieter. Each needs more recovery time. "The last thing he wants is an audience," explains Lily, as we ascend minus MJ toward the nunnery at the top

of the mission. Our brother doesn't like us to witness him counting under his breath when his head gets really bad. Nor does he wish to hear where we've been and what we've been doing without him. MJ would turn his face to the bedroom wall if we were to tell him about having chiggers removed today.

Without flinching, Lily watches Sister Elsa ease the heated needle into a reddened swelling on her left heel. The old Dutch nun sighs; the parasite has already laid eggs in Lily. "You must roll them out," stresses Sister Elsa. Swiveling her wrist, she rotates the silver needle like she's unlocking a door. Sister Elsa withdraws a necklace of minuscule, translucent beads from my sister's foot. She holds the string up to light then cleans the needle with a swipe at her blue habit. When it's my turn, I close my eyes and hear Sister Elsa say: "You must not allow the chain to break." Her guttural accent makes the words sound like an ancient, sacred law; they linger in the nunnery air as a warning. If a chigger string breaks while being removed, the eggs left behind will hatch in your flesh. They'll grow larger and swell fatter. They'll poison your bloodstream. You might lose a limb, as a few of Mitch's village fellows could leglessly attest. That's the reason Lily and I aren't supposed to go barefoot in the dirt. That's why we have to knock at the nunnery several times each dry season when we're careless about sandals and shoes anyway. Like our father, MJ never gets chiggers. Maybe he isn't outside enough for the landscape to infest him. Mitch claims it's because his oldest boy has skin as tough as his. At other times, it's because they're the dark-haired duo. The lucky pair.

Between each headache, it appears, my brother uses up his strength steeling himself for the next one. He's listless even on the increasingly rare days when he says he's OK. Was MJ this quiet on Ios? Wasn't he livelier in Lisbon? I can't remember and Lily won't say. My sister doesn't discuss anything before Africa. "It's because of the moon and the stars," she mentions once, when we're walking back from the river with lucky frogs after dark. Lily means our brother's headaches are influenced by the planets; the pain comes and goes according to whims of Pisces, the dictates of Mars. My sister cranes her neck to study intricate, illuminated patterns spread above. "It's going to get worse," she predicts.

Lily shakes the thermometer, frowns in our father's doorway. "He needs to go to the doctor," she says again—as if it wasn't, in part, to move

beyond reach of quacks that we left Brale, BC in the first place. To put safe distance between ourselves and the damage they'd already done to Ardis. Treatment that turned our mother into a long-term inmate of a cold clinic at the other side of the world. My father looks at Lily then looks back at his maps. "It's all in MJ's mind," he explains, tracing a finger slowly across the Aegean Sea. "He just needs to buck up." The thermometer is missing the next time Lily sends me for it. Now we have no instrument to measure the heat of the fire burning our brother's brain.

MJ's crying makes our houseboy leave the kitchen and walk quickly down the path toward the village. There he'll tell more tales that cause African tongues to click against teeth as Lily and I pass. When Rogacion returns several days later, it's freshly apparent that he never approaches within six feet of my brother. Eventually, he won't wash MJ's sheets or touch his clothes. Lily and I do our best to scrub them in the sink and dry them on the line before Mitch gets home. "The big white *bwana* doesn't have to know about everything," my sister says.

One night it's not my brother's head knocking the wall that wakes me. *Let me in, let me out, let me reach the right number.* Neither MJ nor Lily is near me in the darkness. From beyond the cinder-block house carries a sound I can't identify, a voice I can't place. It pulls me over the rough grass, into Mitch's tangled shrubs. My brother is curled into a ball in the dirt beneath the frangipani. He's naked, growling. A stick is clenched between his teeth, in his foaming mouth. Lily squats nearby, satisfaction shining her face. I retreat unseen. In the morning, I might believe I were remembering another dream if one fleck of red dirt didn't nestle in the corner of my brother's left eye, another in the lobe of his right ear, a third between two front teeth.

Even three weeks at the Mombasa shore doesn't buck up Mitch's gang. On our return to the Ngondo hills in time for another summer's rain, Rogacion fails to re-appear at the kitchen door for work. He's left the area, say some of Mitch's sources; according to others, he died suddenly during our absence. No one else will come from the village; the cinder-block's air of neglect deepens. Now MJ remains inside, whether his head hurts or not. Or because now it always hurts, no matter the season. Five years have thickened the bougainvillea planted around the house by Mitch on our arrival. Purple and orange and red blossoms press against window screens, block

out the drenched world beyond, make our bedroom murkier each month. A too-sweet smell persists within the walls; it won't wash from my brother's sheets, clothes, skin. MJ doesn't whimpers across the darkness anymore. He never growls outside in the night again. His head no longer knocks numbers against the wall. Or maybe I don't hear sounds of disturbance because nothing can waken me now. I've fallen into the enchanted slumber from which I will never escape, except to find myself in an altered setting for what remains the same recurring dream.

In Copenhagen, Jakarta and Rio de Janeiro, Mitch declares that our hasty departure from Morogoro cured his oldest boy. His whole tough team has been tip-top, a-okay, dandy ever since. As we drift farther from the Ngondo hills—without, it seems, ever reaching our next destination—Mitch starts to imply that the damn Brits drove us away. Alternately, it was the Catholics. “Or the chiggers,” Lily sarcastically suggests. She and I wear anklets of pin-sized scars that fail to fade, even as our white-blond hair begins to darken. As surely as it did our brother, Africa got inside me and my sister, burrowed too deep for Sister Elsa's needle to roll cleanly out. “It's the chiggers,” MJ grimaces, when he's no longer able to conceal that his headaches have returned. They're worse than ever by the time we finally make it back to what's left of our mother in Brale, BC. In Canada it's not so easy for Mitch to prevent the quacks from getting at his oldest boy. He tries to hide his satisfaction when tests fail to reveal what's wrong with MJ and drugs won't stop his head from aching. Lily and I pretend surprise when MJ disappears at seventeen. Two years later, vowing to bring my brother home if it's the last thing he ever does, my father vanishes with similar finality. After the lucky pair has gone, it becomes my turn to abandon Lily and Ardis to their separate, similar Brale fates. I wonder if any of us escaped Africa unscathed. Without forsaking one of our own, without breaking the chain, without leaving a limb behind. In my Santa Cruz or Sevilla or Sidi Ifni dreams, the cinder-block house has been swallowed by bougainvillea, transformed into an over-sweet secret. The children's bedroom at one end is obscure in daytime as at night. Sounds of pain burrow through the dark's skin, penetrate its infinite pores, sliver through time and flesh to multiply in my infested depths.