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## INTRODUCTION

Livingstone, Zambia. November 2002. Our tents and the tents of the other travelers are staked in a grassy courtyard, shaded by thirty mango trees and a dozen palms. During our 8:00 a.m. yoga class, while we lie on *kangas*—African print cloth—in the pose of the corpse, focusing on deep breathing, a mango crashes to the ground close to the heads of Kelcy and Natalie. We all jump. Then we laugh. Someone says what we are all thinking—with all the potential hazards in Africa, wouldn't it be ironic to be hurt or killed by a mango?

On a Sunday afternoon in July 2002 I had a parents' meeting at my house. I was nervous, anticipating their doubts and reservations. Before the 1998 Africa semester, parents had been frightened by the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, but no one had requested a meeting. This was 2002, and the events of September 11, 2001, took fear to a new level.

I distracted myself by doing what my mother always does when company arrives: make a pot of coffee, put a tablecloth on the dining room table, and set out platters of food. I arranged plates of the five dozen chocolate chip cookies I had baked in the morning, sliced cheese, washed apples and pears and placed them in a bowl, and set out crackers, olives, chips, and salsa, using as many African items as I could: the large, hand-carved wooden bowl I had carried in my backpack on the way home from Liberia in 1972, wooden spoons from Malawi, smaller bowls from Namibia. I stocked the fridge with soda, juice, and beer and prepared two pitchers of iced tea.

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This is Nebraska, so the first parents rang the doorbell fifteen minutes early. Greeting them, I tried to remember a few names, but by the start of the meeting, I couldn't even match students and parents. I counted thirty-two people on the sofas, chairs, window seat, and floor of my living room: families of the thirteen students signed up for the semester in Africa. I had invited my former student Misha and my friend Carla, who had both been to Africa with me and who would go with our group as assistants.

In May I had participated in a U.S. State Department workshop titled "Managing the Risks of Student Foreign Travel," but nothing prepared me for the anxious faces in my living room. These were parents who had given permission, some grudgingly, some just barely. We introduced ourselves. Everyone was palpably nervous—and chose the shortest introductions, such as "I'm Mary Uldrich, from Milligan." Some omitted the "from" as unnecessary. Kelcy's mom was the exception. She smiled and nodded encouragingly. She's an elementary school principal and knows how to do the parent-student-teacher thing. I wished I'd had a coaching session with her beforehand. I tried to look at her often, without drawing attention to this need for her eye contact.

I welcomed everyone and asked for questions. A long, self-conscious silence ensued. I waited, as I would in a classroom. Finally, Jill's dad asked, "What about safety and health?"

I hesitated, recalling the workshop, wishing I had my notes, but also thinking how ridiculous I would appear rattling off a prepared list of risks and preventions or a guideline for crisis management. "Well," I finally said. "Health and safety. The hard stuff." I said I understood their concerns, having two children myself, about whom I always worry, whether they are home in New York or Baltimore or traveling. I told them what they surely knew, that there are no guarantees or assurances. No such thing as one hundred percent safety—anywhere. Who would have thought Oklahoma City was a dangerous place? You can live cautiously, never travel far from home, take few risks, eat well, exercise, and still fall on your own steps. The best we can do is use good judgment.

The rest is chance or luck. I was sure they were thinking, “Great—I let my kid go to Africa with a person who depends on good luck to see everyone through.”

I had hoped the gathering of the parents at my house would be reassuring. They would look into my eyes and listen to my voice. Decide if I was trustworthy. I wondered what my mother would say to this group. She is a big advocate of seeing for herself, ordinarily from a protected distance. She and my father actually traveled to Liberia to visit me in 1970 when I was a volunteer teacher. It was a major act of courage for my mother to fly in a single-engine bush plane down the undeveloped coast of West Africa. My father, on the other hand, loved the flight from Monrovia. The plane flew low enough to see the canoes on the rivers and villages in the clearings among the thick trees, but he was unnerved riding on rough, unpaved roads. On one afternoon, in a Volkswagen borrowed from the Society of African Missions priests, we drove nine miles to a village called Fishtown to visit Peace Corps friends. My father sat in the front, gripping the seat with one hand and the door handle with the other as we slowly made our way across huge ruts, rocks, and sand. This was January—dry season. In June, July, or August this road, as well as the one (also unpaved) cross-national road, is impassable.

“We can turn back,” he said. “We don’t have to go to Fishtown.” My mother sat in the back, saying nothing.

Neither parent was particularly interested in excursions, preferring to sit in the living room of our cement block cottage or on the small porch facing the lagoon at the tip of Cape Palmas and meeting Liberian and Peace Corps friends and playing with Karen, their baby granddaughter, whom my husband and I had “taken away.” My mother’s statement afterward was, “I feel better now that I’ve seen where you are. Met your friends. I can picture your life.” Even so, she still holds her breath for the entire duration of my trips to Africa.

At the meeting I didn’t mention my mother. I passed around an itinerary, assuring the parents I would keep in contact by e-mail,

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and counted the positive faces: Sonja's parents seemed comfortable. Sonja is a quiet person, someone whom I would not have expected to enroll in the Africa semester, but in fact she's traveled more than most of the others, having lived a summer in Costa Rica. Since Jason rose to top ranks as a boy scout and spent weeks camping in wilderness areas, I wasn't surprised at his parents' enthusiasm for Africa. Sean's dad, a public school science teacher, would love to see Olduvai Gorge and the Ngorongoro Crater. Five, six, counting Kelcy's mom.

The tensions at the meeting didn't ease until we helped ourselves to the snacks in the dining room. Standing in groups of two or three, people introduced themselves, talked, and even exchanged phone numbers. I wondered what I'd accomplished. I'd done little to assuage their doubts. I still had frightening dreams in which I have to say to a parent, "I'm so sorry about your son." And I still had doubts about the semester itself. Why would I trade a familiar and comfortable life in Nebraska for the risky business ahead?

# 1

## Tarzan and Tutankhamen

How I turned out to be the adventurous one in the family, the one who travels to remote parts of the world, is a mystery to anyone who knew me growing up. I was afraid of nearly everything. My mother's fear of dogs passed to me directly. She and I would sit in a car for an hour, waiting for a stray to move out of sight. I was afraid of loud noises and anyone dressed in black. The crash of trains coupling on the railway bridge a fourth of a mile behind our house sent me flying into my parents' room at night. I remember forever hiding in public by holding a section of my mother's skirt over my face. I was terrified of my father's great-aunt Julie, who wore black and who reminded me of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, a film that I attended with nursery school mates but bolted from in a fit of fear and nausea. I dreaded birthday parties at the amusement park because I hated the Ferris wheel, roller coaster, and merry-go-round. Also, it was a place where my mother's skirts could not protect me. All nuns were scary, especially the ones in full black with white winged hoods, looking to me like eerie, marauding birds.

Of all the things that scared me, I was most afraid of injuries and prosthetics—crutches, casts, canes, and wheelchairs. I covered my eyes when I saw amputees, often soldiers with one pant leg or sleeve pinned up. I actually flunked out of nursery school, or was kicked out, because when the teacher sprained her ankle and came to school on crutches, I freaked out.

I was embarrassingly old (nine or ten) when I pretended to be asleep during a visit from my grandmother after she broke her arm and wore a cast. It was a family joke that I fainted or threw

up or both in hospitals. For years, even at a twenty-first birthday party, I got cards and joke gifts referring to my childhood demons and my usual reaction to trauma—throwing up.

I don't remember why or how Africa became the place I wanted to go. As a child, faraway places for me meant the images on the small black-and-white photos with serrated edging that my father sent us from Europe. These were images of my dad and his soldier buddies in uniform in front of monuments—the Eiffel Tower, a bridge on the Seine, Notre Dame Cathedral. I was four when my father came back from France. I was living with my mother, her mother, her sister and brother-in-law, and my two cousins in the Jewish neighborhood of Liberty Heights in Baltimore. I knew that my grandmother, her nine siblings, and a couple of great-uncles had come from Russia, another faraway place, and later I learned the village name Oberdifka, in the Ukraine, near Kiev. The two Russian uncles I visited on occasional Sundays, Rachmil and Jake, were Old World characters, bearded Jews in black suits and yarmulkes, out of Sholom Alechem or central casting in Hollywood. They spoke with accents, were formal and strange, and mostly, in my eyes, very, very old. My cousins and I dreaded the visits. In a large atlas, too big for me to hold, my father showed me the pastel-colored shapes of the places he had been stationed or visited in Europe: Holland, Belgium, France, and Luxembourg. I found the maps beautiful—complicated, detailed, abstract. I could not make the connection between the patterns on the page, the myriad tiny words, the blue squiggly lines for rivers, and real places a person might go to and send postcards or photos from.

I remember the word *Africa* spoken for the first time by a second-grade substitute teacher, Mrs. Perkins, reading aloud *Tarzan of the Apes*. I would have been seven years old then, in 1950. I loved these stories and hoped every day that our regular teacher would be absent. I imagined Tarzan, described by Edgar Rice Burroughs as the perfect human specimen—tall, broad, and hugely muscled—an adult, learning to read from a simple picture dictionary, just as we puny little kids were doing in school. He recognized

the images of trees, flowers, lions, and elephants, but he didn't comprehend the "little bugs" under the drawings. When he finally connected the "little bugs" with the pictures, he realized he was an M-A-N and not an A-P-E. Though he learned to read, he couldn't pronounce English because he'd never heard it spoken.

I reread *Tarzan* recently to see if I could recapture the fascination I had as a second-grader. I was surprised at Burroughs's racist characterization of the Africans, something that did not register when I first heard the stories. Burroughs had never traveled to Africa, and in 1912, when he imagines the novel, in a country supposedly based on the Congo, the people he describes are cartoon caricatures: cannibals with teeth filed to points, wearing grass skirts and loincloths, who torture their human victims before eating them. Burroughs must have done some research, however, because he refers to the cruel treatment of the people by King Leopold of Belgium. Tarzan was embarrassed to be a white man when he observed the Europeans (also stereotyped, but perhaps closer to the mark) as bickering, greedy, and inept—with the exception of Jane Porter, of course, to whom Tarzan never actually said, "Me Tarzan, you Jane."

When I was nine or ten, I began Saturday morning art classes at the Baltimore Museum of Art. These classes were free with a five-dollar family membership. I remember my awe of the giant building with the cement steps leading up to a huge statue of Rodin's *The Thinker*. If I absorbed ideas about Africa in the museum, it was unconscious, subliminal. I raced through the halls of the old building, past the glass case of African masks and carvings. I climbed the four flights to the classrooms and paused on the landings, at the mummy collection, running my hands on the stone sarcophagi. In class we sat at long tables—students of my age through high school—and drew or painted with simple materials provided by the museum: rough paper, colored chalks, charcoal sticks, jars of basic watercolors, and brushes. Occasionally we walked through the collections and chose something to copy. I remember sitting on the floor under a Degas dancer in the Cone

Collection. One Saturday I copied a Van Gogh shoe and rocking chair. I liked to copy the African masks, not because of connections to a particular place or culture but because they were simple designs, easy to draw and shade with charcoal.

I also read illustrated books about ancient Egypt, King Tutankhamen, his tomb and treasures, the pyramids, the Sphinx, and the artifacts and hieroglyphics on the walls of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and Queens. My ambition was to be either a detective, like Nancy Drew, or an anthropologist who might discover golden treasures. I romanticized these professions and played make-believe games with my friend Sheila and my cousin Howard.

My parents and their friends devoured the words of the baby guru Dr. Benjamin Spock. Psychology was a new science in the forties and debating theories of parenting a post-World War II luxury. My mother and her women friends formed a group they called Child Study and held meetings to discuss the various issues and dilemmas they faced as postwar homemakers—a syndrome identified by Betty Friedan in 1963 as “the thing that has no name.” Once a month, in an early form of “rap” and “consciousness-raising” groups, they took up topics, discussed articles and books, and invited speakers.

Partly to preserve the fun of young marriage and to share the expense and labor of raising families, my parents and their friends developed a unique and creative living situation. In the late forties, after the men returned from military service, they bought adjoining brick row houses with Veterans’ Administration loans. They worked out a three-family cooperative, a self-styled kibbutz, sharing a car, a freezer, and a lawn mower. They rigged an intercom system between the bedrooms and the living rooms so they could gather in one of the houses at night for conversation, coffee, and tv while being alert to the kids. They shopped for one another, prepared meals together, planned three-family vacations, and split the costs of babysitters. They successfully planned their families so as to have second and third children at about the same time—

nine in all, three children each. My closest age-mate, Susan, is two years younger than I am; in the first round of planned births, a year into the extended family, my sister Linda was born, followed in the next couple of months by Edward and Frieda; two years later came my youngest sister, Mindy, followed by Arthur; and in the last round, Amy and Philip. As the oldest, I taught the younger ones to ride bikes, walked them home from school, took them for haircuts, helped with homework, and, when I learned to drive, earned private use of the car by chauffeuring them all over town. We kids endlessly talked, played, fought, bit, contrived pranks, and analyzed our parents and each other. In this kibbutz there was little tolerance of intrafamily competition; on the contrary, we celebrated each of our achievements and agonized over defeats. Amazingly, my parents' cooperative far outlasted their child-rearing time. More than fifty years later, it's still going.

I was a good student and thought I was capable of being a top student, but my mother countered my ambitions. Later I realized why she resisted my desire for recognition, but at the time I was baffled by her insistence that I was "average." She always said, "I'm sure you did your best" if I brought home top grades, and I was sure she'd say the same if I failed. She was waging a personal battle against the boastful mothers in her Child Study group, who found minimal achievements, such as pronouncing a three-syllable word, evidence of genius. Peace in the kibbutz also depended on minimizing competition among the kids. I knew she was proud of me, and privately I received some praise, but in public the stamp of average made me feel invisible, undifferentiated, blended in.

I was selected for the accelerated program at Robert E. Lee Junior High School, where we collapsed three years of study into two. I attended this school but, convinced I was average, felt I didn't belong, that my scores had been mistaken for someone else's higher ones.

My childhood fantasies of being a detective or an anthropologist receded into oblivion at Forest Park High, where suddenly I