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Mascots

WE CAME FROM MANY CORNERS OF THE GLOBE, THOUGH IN TRUTH they were corners found primarily in North America and the European Union, which is to say, the corners of the globe that mattered. We were employed by our governments or the big acronyms—IRC, UNESCO, USAID, ICRC, WHO—and like twins who create a language only they can understand, we discussed IFBs and RFPs, the OAU and OAS; the newest IO partnering with a local NGO.

We'd come via other corners of the globe, but those corners were places that hardly mattered—Somalia and Bangladesh; Sudan and Afghanistan; all the many refugee camps scattered like bread crumbs, those purgatorial, in-between places. *Hardship posts*, though the more sanctimonious among us refused to call them by such a name, insisting that we'd never gone anywhere more beautiful (*The mountains! The seaside!*), more rich in cultural tradition and history (*The pottery! The ruins!*).

Once, a Swede—a baby—declared that he *loved* Papua New Guinea.

We sniggered. It had been his first post after graduate school; he'd only ever been there and here; it was too soon in his short career for him to realize that he was lying, most especially to himself. The rest of us understood that saying you loved Papua New Guinea was like saying you loved it here, in this country with its clay roads naked children ran about and shat in, its miles of tin shanties you averted your eyes from whenever you took an air-conditioned car to or from the airport. Saying you loved Papua New Guinea was like saying you loved this place where you couldn't buy a decent loaf of bread much less a bottle of Bordeaux; where you lived and worked behind high walls and locked yourself behind bars, fastening them over the windows and doors of your home at night, and found yourself eyeing the guard at the gate, the gardener and housekeeper and cook, wondering if one of them hadn't been responsible for the disappearance of the opal pendant you'd inherited from your grandmother or the fifty euros you'd sworn you left in your trousers last Saturday night when you'd come home from the disco drunk and reeking of other expatriates' sweat.

In the city's main park, in the midst of an afternoon stroll from the British Embassy to the administrative offices of Médecins Sans Frontières, we'd all become accustomed to seeing the men with their tattered trousers puddled around their bare ankles, their hands as stiff and hard as the members they held, working out their frustrations in public. *A national pastime*, muttered Natalia. We wondered: did she mean the jerking off or the despair? For that's what it

was—frustration, desperation, despair. Andres would laugh at the sight of them, wave his hand as if to join the club, but Natalia would bark at the men in a dialect the rest of us hadn't bothered learning (*We're here two, three years tops, we rationalized. What would be the point of all that effort to learn a language we'll never use again?*). Whatever it was she said those men were quick to stop, pulling their trousers up and dashing off into the wild overgrowth that lined the sidewalks crumbling beneath our feet.

Andres and Natalia were the only two locals among us. *Our mascots*, we called them, but behind their backs of course; we knew better than to say it to their faces. We invited them to our parties, the discotheque, the country club. We asked them questions about local culture and food, the history of ethnic tensions in the East, trying our best to appear concerned, united as we were in our humanitarian mission of making this corner of the globe a better place.

Natalia had a PhD in microbiology from the National University, was a specialist in infectious diseases. She'd spent time in Washington at NIH and had been a post-doc in Marseille before returning home to, as she put it, *Improve the situation on the ground*. She worked too much, ate too little, and believed in change, her faith and fervor rivaled only by the missionaries seldom invited into our social circles. We rolled our eyes and smirked at each other when she launched into impassioned sermons, inevitably quoting Margaret Mead, Mahatma Gandhi. We loved and resented Natalia. She was always making us wistful for a time when we had wept tears of joy over the release of Nelson Mandela or had marched in protest after protest—to stop famine in Ethiopia, the genocide in Rwanda—a time before experience had taught us better.

Andres was the first cousin of the former dictator or so we'd been told; he neither confirmed nor denied this association. He was handsome in the way bearish, pregnant-bellied men sometimes are, quick to flash his oversized smile, straight white teeth set into the smooth dark hills of his face. With Andres cookouts became dance parties. He'd turn up the music, getting us to tear up the lawn, despite the insufferably hot nights, waking small children our nannies had tucked in distant corners of our cavernous homes only hours before. If ever in Andres's company we complained of being unable to secure a reservation at a popular vacation destination, a week later we'd receive a message confirming an ocean-view suite for our desired time. After trying for months to get on the Minister of Education's schedule, Andres would make a call, tell us to be there tomorrow at eleven.

Andres drank imported Scotch none of us could find anywhere in country; he carried a small silver flask of it in his briefcase. Now and then he pulled it out, offered it up. The first time he'd done this we were certain the bottle was filled with the ghastly lighter fluid found at every kiosk in this wretched capital city. How wrong we were! Velvety smooth, it coated throats dry with dust and heat and petrol exhaust, soothed mouths tired from all the negotiating, debating, and persuading that never got any of us any closer to something resembling success.

Andres was a useful friend to have, though it was always unclear what use we were to him.

Once, at an event celebrating the start of a new irrigation project in the North, Natalia pointed her wine glass at Andres. *One day*, she said, *that man will run this country and a few of our neighbors along with it.*

We all laughed; all of us, that is, except Natalia, whose mouth was set in the straightest of horizons. She blinked in turn at each of us and it seemed that to meet her gaze would be as dangerous as staring directly into the noonday sun.

Most of us had been doing this for a while, with the occasional stints in Paradise. London, Paris, Rome, New York, Geneva—hell, even The Hague was paradise for us. We yearned for functional plumbing, reliable electricity, public transportation that ran on time (though with cars and drivers this was a superfluous complaint); stores that had daily fixed schedules and carried items we'd actually want to purchase. We missed movie theaters, the opera, bars with beer served ice cold, and restaurants with food worth paying money for—spicy saag paneer, fresh sushi, foie gras. We missed bagels, black currant scones, and a perfectly flaky croissant, peanut butter and marmalade and vegemite. Oh how we suffered for our work! When one of us left the country for a business meeting, a family funeral, orders were taken. *What shall I bring back? What do you all want?*

In those moments, our minds would go blank. We knew there was something, an item we desperately needed, were swiftly running out of, something essential we couldn't live without. We scratched our chins and heads, ran mental inventories of our pantries, our medicine and liquor cabinets. What was it again?

On this particular occasion we were poolside at the compound of a Spaniard who headed a micro-enterprise project funded by a Hungarian billionaire said to be throwing his money around the developing world. We floated in the kidney-shaped pool, the dust of the city rising from our skin and skimming the surface like gelatin boiled off bone. Some of us paused midsentence, cocked our heads—*Was that gunfire? Do you smell smoke?*—then shrugged it off, returning to our gin and tonics, our dirty martinis. We admired the well-tended desert rose bushes and the terra cotta pots of birds of paradise, felt the cool tiles of the pool brush against the soles of our feet. We considered the possibility of getting our own grant from the Hungarian's foundation, the dampened fire of ambition briefly relit, for an all girls' school maybe, or a nutrition program for young mothers, an educational campaign focused on minority rights. We'd learned long ago that all it took was one well-written proposal and some connections in the field. Perhaps, we thought, Andres could lend a hand.

Servants swung platters of glistening oysters and pink prawns; we gnashed their tails between our teeth. If we squinted hard enough through the smog of the city, held our breaths against the sulfurous air, we could almost imagine being someplace else—Barbados, the Greek Isles. Ducking underwater, burbling through to silence, we fancied that when we broke the surface magic would have happened and there we would be in those dreamed-up places.

The Spaniard's wife mentioned she was off to Brussels in a few days and wondered if we had any requests, some special treat perhaps, from Paradise.

How about democracy? Natalia was always faster than the rest of us. *How about antimalarial vaccinations and potable water and books for our children? How about a couple of qualified gynecologists for my sisters dying in childbirth?*

Who rolled in the soapbox? Andres slurred. He lolled on a chaise lounge, his Tommy Bahamas shirt unbuttoned to reveal his excesses, his fifth glass of sangria tilted precariously in one hand. *You must forgive my sister. Our local women are known for their beauty but not necessarily for their wit.*

I'm not your sister, hissed Natalia, holding up a hand when the Spaniard's wife offered her a plate of plantain croquettes. Looking on, we all silently wished she'd eat; lately, Natalia had begun to look gaunt, and the croquettes, we all agreed, were divine.

Lighten up, Natalia, said Andres. He raised his glass towards a server old enough to be his grandfather, snapped his fingers. *It's a party!*

We looked away, embarrassed by Andres's behavior but also by the feelings bubbling in our sated bellies. We wouldn't say so, but we agreed with him. Hadn't we spent enough time during the workweek thinking about the problems of the world? Was it really too much to ask to give it a rest for a single afternoon? Recently, Natalia had become less inspirational activist and more nagging spouse, lecturing us about the troubles in the East as if she were reminding us to eat our leafy greens, cut back on fatty red meats.

Didn't you say you're off to Belgium? someone finally chimed in. *How about chocolates?*

Yes! We all agreed. *Belgian chocolates! That's just what we've been dreaming of!*

An hour later, Natalia was packing her beach bag, pulling her sunglasses down over her tired eyes, wrapping her batik sarong around her hips.

Leaving so soon? we asked. We felt anxious suddenly for her to stay.

There's a report that needs finishing before I head out for a few weeks. She clasped the hand of her son. A quiet and somber five-year-old, he'd inherited the same beautifully melancholic expression his mother wore most days lately, an expression that led the regional head of UNICEF to suggest they use him in promotional photos for their next fundraising initiative. Natalia had refused, of course. *Oh, Natalia!* The pay would have been in euros or dollars; that money would have gone a long way in a place like this. *If only Natalia knew what was good for her!*

Goodbye, Natalia said, kissing the cheeks of the Spaniard and his wife. *Thank you so much for the lovely afternoon.*

It wasn't until after she'd gone that it dawned on us: *Did she say she was going away?*

Now the party can finally begin! boomed Andres.

Some of us gave a hoot. Some of us raised our glasses, but our arms felt heavy with the effort. Soon enough we were folding up our towels and gathering

our family members around us, our sunburns itching beneath T-shirts and linen tunics, the sun not yet set for the evening but our heads thrumming with exhaustion. *Thank you*, we said to the Spaniard and his wife, *Such a splendid party!* and puzzled over the bitterness pooling in our mouths when we uttered the words, the same thing that happened whenever we caught ourselves telling lies.

Back home, we'd left things behind. Careers, for example, and apartments filled with designer clothing and books and stainless steel electric appliances. Bicycles, boats, cars. Some of us had left pets—golden retrievers and Siamese cats and tanks full of tropical fish. Some of us had left relationships—girlfriends and boyfriends, even spouses and children whose photos we kept in tidy frames around our homes or fastened to bulletin boards above our office desks, serving as constant reminders of what we'd left behind.

We had justifications. The careers were dead-end and underpaid, were desk jobs, not like here where even if you did work at a desk you could look out your window and watch giraffes or water buffalo drift by like clouds, observe baboons doing back-flips from the branches of acacia trees or purple herons plucking rodent-sized insects from their feathers, snapping their mandibles at each other's eyes in some sadist mating ritual. We complained that our wives had wanted us to buy them mansions in the suburbs of Houston or Dublin; our husbands had wanted us to cook them three-course meals at the end of a long workday, to deny our worldly ambitions, become kept women. Those of us who had left our children behind agreed they were better off with their mothers or fathers, their grandparents or aunts or uncles, because to live in an unstable place such as this was no life for a child (never mind the children born into this place with no choice in the matter), too dangerous for us to risk their welfare. Had the rest of us noticed the proliferation of soldiers lately, heard gunshots at night? No, we concurred, our children were most certainly better off back home, going to school, making friends, living a normal life, without us.

Those of us with children here seethed during these discussions, silently soothing ourselves with the knowledge that we were by far the better parents, that it was proof positive we loved our children more to have kept them close beside us.

The single among us said there was nothing really to stay behind for and joked about our old high school and college friends working for the man or worse as café baristas, spending money on tattoos and body piercings and bars and yoga classes, scouring online dating sites for hours so they'd have someone to get sauced with and fuck on the weekends, someone to hold their hands while they sat on the couch watching the latest blockbuster or major sporting event.

Despite these differences we all agreed on one thing: people back home had no clue what was happening in the world. People back home didn't bother trying to find out, they were all getting fat on ignorance and inertia; none of

them were actually trying to *do* anything in the world. Why would any of us want to live like all those sad sacks back home?

We were not a little bit smug about how well informed we were. We'd made it a competition amongst ourselves, reading five or six different international newspapers or online journals a day, playing drinking games that involved naming the capitals of the most obscure countries in the world. *Capital of Vanuatu? Port Vila. Capital of Turkmenistan? Ashgabat. Capital of Micronesia? Palikir.* And the tax-free disposable income helped. We could vacation on the beaches of Cape Town or go for ski trips in the Swiss Alps or spend a month on a yacht with friends, sailing the Adriatic.

We believed that despite its inconveniences and the rumors of political unrest in the East, life here was better in quality. Slower. Relaxed. This place, we agreed, taught us to savor the simple things. A book mailed all the way from Italy. An evening meal with friends. The sunsets that spread like melted butter across the patios of our houses, houses we'd never have been able to own back home, but could enjoy, for the time being, here.

For two weeks after the Spaniard's pool party, none of us knew where Natalia was. Those of us who were closest to her visited the home she shared with her sister, mother, and son.

She's gone East, said the sister, her long arms draped over the shoulders of Natalia's son who looked up at us with his tea saucer eyes. *Some new vaccination project she's working on.*

This was news to us. We were unaware of Natalia doing anything in the East. Afterward, we spoke in hushed tones.

Had she said anything to you?

Not a word.

It can't be safe. What was she thinking?

At the country club one afternoon, a few of us were practicing on the driving range when Andres appeared with two other men, all of them looking smart in bright golfing plaids. We realized it had been some time since last we'd seen him. Had it been the very same pool party when last we'd seen Natalia?

How is our Natalia? Andres asked.

We glanced at once another. What a mind-reader Andres could be!

Any news?

No, we replied. *We heard she's working in the East.*

This caught the interest of one of the men with Andres, who leaned toward him, mumbled something we couldn't hear.

Andres drew a three iron from his bag, took a couple practice swings. *Working in the East, you say? That's no place for someone like her.* When he turned to face us we saw our own troubled expressions reflected back in the mirrors of his sunglasses. *Tell me: Has she ever told you about her husband?*

Husband? We realized we'd never considered the possibility before now.

Andres laughed. *Where do you think the child came from—the sky?*

He wasn't a good sort, one of Andres's friends said. *Dissent only breeds more dissent. We can't afford to have too much of that here.*

Later, after we'd left, someone murmured: *Wasn't that the Military Chief? Wasn't that the Minister of Defense?*

Some of us left dreams back home. The bakery we'd imagined opening; the nonprofit arts center we'd halfheartedly fundraised for; the theater school we might have applied to had we been braver. These were the big dreams. The smaller dreams we'd left back home were simpler, purer; they made us ache in the deepest marrow of our bones. We dreamed of normalcy, of seeing our kids off on bright yellow school buses, greeting them when they came home for midday lunches of cabbage soup and hunks of crusty baguettes. We dreamed of marrying high school and college sweethearts. We laughed ruefully. *The ones that got away.* We dreamed of a time when we still lived at home, before we'd ever thought of living anywhere else, when we were close with our families and didn't need to count the hours on our fingers whenever we wanted to telephone them.

All of us dreamed of taking a cooking class or joining a rugby team or learning to play guitar. We tried, sometimes, to realize those things here; sometimes, for a short while, they stuck. There was a cooperative nursery school, an inter-embassy football league, a rock band that called itself The Internationalists and performed at birthday and cocktail parties. There was the Parisian who held a reading salon once a month.

We all enjoyed it—men and women, married and single, diplomats, economists, environmentalists, aid and human rights workers. We all had come to rely on reading for those long stretches at airports and, more recently, on the weekends when our embassies released warnings that it was unsafe to leave our compounds, our flats, our gated communities. We had books shipped in by the box loads—novels and memoirs and biographies of famous people, people we'd imagined one day becoming if we had half an ounce of ambition. Books on the history of the continent we lived on, continents we intended one day to move to. Books on nutrition and art, religion and spiritualism, something to provide just a bit of salvation in what was increasingly becoming a godless world. *Bang-bang*, the world outside said, and we huddled in closer, directed each other's attention to page 57, page 214. We told each other we'd one day write books ourselves, books about our unique experiences, our lives as expatriates living in strange, faraway lands.

But these efforts never lasted for long. The kids at the nursery came of age and were sent off to boarding schools overseas or back home. The field where the football league had hosted its matches was dug up, the foundation laid for a new hotel. The Internationalists disbanded after some drunken artistic disagreement.

The Parisian got married to her long-distance flame. She sent us wedding photos, she in a silk sheath, a white gardenia pinned above her ear; her handsome

husband in a charcoal-colored suit, his arm looped round her waist. *How happy she looks!* we all cried. *How very, very happy!*

She'd been transformed, reinvented into someone new. We were all addicted to reinvention; it's why we lived the way we did.

Eventually, Natalia returned.

A bunch of us had gathered at the Italian restaurant after work, were seated on the patio. Around us bees and hummingbirds worked away at the jasmine that climbed the wrought iron gates. Above us was a black dome covered in a million speckles of light, as if those very bees and hummingbirds had pricked the darkness with their stingers and bills, letting the light of the universe shine through the holes they'd made. On the opposite side of the gates a half dozen soldiers stood guard, guns cocked. Their uniforms draped off their slight shoulders, sagged from their narrow hips, revealing the boys they still were.

Only a handful of us saw her at first. Through the open doors she appeared at the front entrance, walked up to the bar and greeted the bartender, her hand clasped in his, their faces close. The rest of us looked up. *Is that Natalia?* Some of us gasped. She had been gone a little over a month but appeared to have aged years. Her skin was gray and pulled tight across her bones. Dark circles held up her eyes. Sensing she was being watched, Natalia turned toward us.

Natalia! we cried. *Hello!*

Some of us raised our hands, got to our feet. A few of us noticed the frown before she smiled; fewer of us observed that as we approached, the bartender slipped his hand from hers to retrieve a bottle from the opposite end of the bar. We hadn't yet realized that it was the beginning of the end; people had begun to take sides. Having long believed ourselves neutral, above internal politics, we were unaware of the role we played in it all, that to be associated with us would mean the difference between taking one side or another.

We heard you were in the East. We were so worried.

As if she were a frail and beloved aunt, we guided her by the elbow to our table.

It's terrible, she said, what's happening. You need to get word back to your governments and agencies. People are starving to death.

But that can't be, someone said. We only just shipped several thousand tons of food there last week.

And medical supplies, said another. *TB vaccines and antimalarial drugs.*

Natalia shook her head. We worried at the weight of it, how the quick jerking motion might snap the slender branch of her neck. *The government is accusing people of harboring rebels. They're withholding supplies. Just ask your friend Andres.*

We felt the burn of her accusation, cast looks around the table, but were too afraid to consider out loud what we were thinking. Lately, Andres had been declining our invitations. We still saw him at the country club, the discotheque, but more often he'd appear to us during work hours, at a meeting with the French

ambassador, say, or a day-long conference meant to address rising instability in the region. He was serving, he said, as a government representative. Still jovial and affable, he continued to offer us nips from his flask. But his presence was tidier; his Italian suits pressed, shoes polished. He seemed to have lost weight.

There were rumors, of course, as there always were. In the past we'd never taken them seriously, so why would we start now? Every place we'd ever lived before had men like Andres, men who knew how to get us what we needed without the rest of the world finding out about it, things we didn't want leaked—drugs and prostitutes, yes, but also secret meetings with government officials or members of the political opposition or heads of influential corporations in the region. To us Andres was no different than any other man that had come before him. But the way Natalia spit out his name, we all began to have our doubts.

You need to do something, Natalia said. *Use your connections.*

Someone laughed. *What connections?*

You have resources. Money. You can get the word out.

You don't understand, Natalia, someone else said. *It doesn't work that way.*

It's not our place. We're just here to assist.

Oh, please! cried Natalia. *Don't play games!*

We don't have that kind of influence, one of the Americans said. *We're middle management.*

The rest of us nodded, murmured agreement.

Middle management? Natalia snorted. *What does that even mean?*

In helpless silence we watched her leave, passing through the French doors and across the dining room, exiting the restaurant, exiting our lives.

Our housekeepers, cooks, and nannies began to talk back, to sneer. They swiped food from the pantry, slipped hot sauce in the soup. Our gardeners refused to get on their knees and weed the garden; our guards got drunk and invited friends they failed to introduce to us past the gates. Just when we were about to fire them they quit, leaving dirty dishes in the sink, rotting food in the refrigerator, soiled linens in heaps on the bedroom floor. The front gates creaked back and forth in the wind, wide open to intruders.

At night, helicopters flew low over the city, strobe lights pointed down in search of we knew not who or what. Some of us sent our spouses and children back home for the short term, until we had a better sense of where things were headed. We got worried phone calls and emails from home. *Are you safe? When will you leave? The news over here is not good.*

Among us, contractors and nonessential personnel left first. The Spaniard's compound became available, but none of us would consider moving into it now, not when there was the chance we might find ourselves packing up again months later.

The electricity went off once a day. Our mobile phones *click-clicked* whenever we made calls.

CARE projects closed. WWF and USAID followed suit.

We called Andres but he never answered or responded to our messages. We'd heard rumors he was becoming an increasingly important man and, unlike before, were inclined now to believe them.

We ceased throwing parties but still saw plenty of each other. We curled up on each other's sofas and sipped sour wine, nibbled on stale macadamia nuts. We spoke about what we'd do next, where we might go, while outside the light faded and the sky grew dark and shadows of what we thought must be animals lurked past our line of vision.

Eventually, it was the embassies that made the decision for us. We were ordered to pack only what we could carry, leaving houses and flats filled up with belongings. Anyone who remained behind would do so at his or her own peril. We took dark-windowed cars across borders to airports that were open and hospitable to foreigners. From there we hopped on flights back to the closest thing we'd had left to a home.

Only a small handful of us stayed behind, running not away from but toward conflict, to the East where things were worst, hoping to help, becoming the people we'd all at some point in our personal histories dreamed of becoming, and in that way ceasing to be one of us.

Later, in the homes of relatives or friends, or in newly rented flats or hotel rooms in other, more stable corners of the globe, we learned about Andres. His broad smile appeared to us on television and computer screens, in photos in the international sections of newspapers.

What a horrible man, our parents or friends or children or spouses said. *What a lunatic. Did you ever meet him? Did you want to kill him?*

It's complicated, we'd say, our eyes never leaving the television or computer screen, the newspaper. *These things are never so black and white.*

This was met with raised eyebrows, crossed arms. *It seems awfully black and white.*

We suppressed the urge to debate this point. We knew it would only lead to more questions we'd be unable to answer, that in a sense we would have to defend ourselves, our tolerance and complacency, our willful blindness. Sure, we'd say, we'd accepted his favors, invited him to parties, sipped his Scotch. We thought Andres was fun; how we laughed with him! But to defend him was to say that we condoned him, and none of us had done that. Or had we? Our eyes drifted to Andres's pixilated image. He looked fit, we thought, cut from stone. That smile.

Sometimes, we told our loved ones, *it is a choice between the lesser of two evils*. They sighed, dissatisfied, but left it alone. It was the only way to end an argument we knew we'd never win. And in a few weeks' time it would seem our point was proven when we'd see still more photos of Andres, most often posing, shaking the hands of important world leaders—secretaries of state, prime ministers, presidents.

But our guilt, for what we were unsure, would not abate. At night, we lay

awake in our borrowed beds and thought of Natalia. We wondered where she was and, though most of us were not the sort, prayed for her safety. We thought about those conversations we'd had with her, what she'd been trying to tell us that we'd never understood. She'd seen it all along, but for us it had required the gifts of time and distance. What Andres had needed had always been there for the taking, he took it without asking, and we'd never denied him.

In the end, some of us did what Natalia had asked us on that final night to do. We scheduled meetings, wrote letters and op-eds, sent checks to organizations that were working on the ground. Had we tried hard enough? Had we done all that we could possibly do? We thought so, though we could never be sure. Wasn't there, after all, *always* something more that could be done? We weren't superheroes. Eventually, we had to move forward, move on. Weeks and then months passed and more immediate and pressing concerns—the next job, the next home, the next country—demanded our attention.