

She Murdered Mortal He

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THE BEAUTIFUL INDIFFERENCE
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When the fight was over she left the salon tent and walked towards the beach. The way through the jungle was signposted. It was not yet dark. She was not sure what to do. Everything was out of control. She wanted to think clearly, get her bearings. She wanted not to feel so lost, or to feel so lost that nothing more could be taken. Mostly she just wanted to leave their room. She followed the path through the bowed and necking trees. The air was heavy, greenly perfumed, and the avian calls were loud and greasy. The dust felt cool against her feet. She turned left, then right. They had walked this way earlier, after arriving in the complex, to get to the town a mile up the coast, and they'd been surprised by the sudden vertiginous drop. The jungle ended abruptly and the dunes were incredibly steep. There was no gradation. The dark canopy, with its humidity and silicone music, gave way to a long corrugated ramp, ionic sea wind, vast space – two utterly different realms. The path wove through the brush. She stooped under low branches, careful, despite the surging recklessness,

where she trod, not wanting to disturb snakes coiled under the leaves.

What's wrong, she had asked him, as they lay on the bed after their trip into town, stroking his back. You seem distracted.

Nothing, he had said a few times.

But she had persisted. What? What is it?

After a while he had turned.

Something feels different, he had said. Don't you think so?

They had been together a year. He had said nothing like this before. She had knelt upright at the corner of the bed, and put her arms round herself. He had begun breathing hard, blowing out, as if what he was saying, or was about to say, was heavy labour.

Something feels wrong between us. We should talk about it.

Then, with such terrible ease, it had all begun to unravel. Their meeting at the Hallowe'en party, and his ridiculous bloody stump. Their conversation about Flaubert, the shared cigarette. The kiss, in his terrible heatless flat. The late-night texts. Their first dinner party with its triumphant co-concocted fish soup. The formative moments, winding away, as if they had never been safe.

She picked her way through the foliage, through

muggy, scented chambers. Now the birds around her sounded electrical, like mobile phones. Every time she heard a melodic stammer she thought she would come upon someone talking. But there was no one on the path – the lodge was almost deserted, the other salon tents were empty. And there was no phone signal here. An occasional bar crept up on the display, then disappeared, a faint or false satellite. She stopped. All around were intimately knotted branches. The pulp inside the peeling bark was an extraordinary garish orange. There were leopards in here, they had been told by their driver – elusive, flaxen-eyed creatures that were almost never seen. Or seen too late. They were gradually coming back after years of being hunted. And the thought occurred to her, that if one of them were to take her now, powerfully by the neck, and drag her up into the crux of a tree, what then? Nothing then. She began walking again.

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The tide was on the way out. She knew this even before coming upon the beach. She could hear its retreat, the sonorous hiss at the back of its throat. The trees finished. The air thinned. She saw the ocean for

the second time that day, and drew a breath. How had she forgotten its scale, its grandeur? The water was a literal blue. All blues. For a moment the scene looked like one of the cheap plasticised paintings of the Mediterranean on sale in the harbours of southern Europe. But this was not the Mediterranean. This was a body of water so prodigious it looked almost solid, except for the ragged crests, the series of spraying breakers that came from far out and swept up the shore, driving sand high into the jungle. This ocean generated its own wind. It bellowed. Its inhabitants were huge breaching creatures that were of no consequence. After an aborted attempt earlier that day they had not swum. Even knee-deep the undertow had been too strong, dragging their feet down into trenches, making them flap their arms, squat forward and wade against the pull.

The holiday had been her idea. She had read an article in the travel section of the *Guardian*. The writer had urged people to come before the character of the place changed irreversibly. She'd pitched the idea, of being more intrepid, of a different kind of trip, and after a week or two he'd agreed. They had left the hire car at the South African border and been brought to the tiny, fledgling resort in an old white Land Rover with an insecure driver's door that

kept swinging open. The driver's name was Breck. He was from Richards Bay, but had come north because the opportunities for new tourism were exciting. He taught scuba and arranged whale-watching during migration season. As he drove down the unmade roads he waved to the women carrying canisters and baskets on their hips and heads, and to the children. There were children everywhere. When they passed a man with no hands sitting on an oil drum he said, Look. Long sleeves, I reckon. He's from Zimbabwe. A few have come here. It used to be the other way round. What do you do? he'd asked them.

I'm a lawyer.

Ah. Right. Clever guy. And you?

I manage a company that arranges ghost tours.

Oh, what, to see ghosts?

Places where people have seen ghosts, in London.

There are lots of places.

But not the ghosts?

No.

That's good. Then they can't ask for their money back.

Not really, no.

Though an American woman had fainted in Whitechapel the previous week and had made an of-

ficial complaint. She had not realised the tour would include spots where victims of the Ripper had been found, she said. She just wanted to see queens and princes. Breck had worked hard to sell the area to them, playing up the economic recovery, making claims about the restoration of wildlife.

The transit vehicle needed to be booked in advance. The border checkpoint closed at 5 p.m. Though she did not want to stay at the lodge that night, though she could not face seeing him after what had been said, or half said, her window to leave was gone.

She waded down the steep sand bank, leaning back, sinking up to her calves. The beach levelled off and she began to walk towards the headland with the cliff path that could be taken into town. Crabs were working the tideline, scissoring pieces of blue jellyfish, dragging the dissections backwards into their burrows. The sun was setting on the other side of the dunes. She could not see any red display, just a dull luminescence above the treetops. She turned and looked behind. The beach was misty with spray and deserted, a long alluvial corridor. He was not following. He would not follow; she knew that. She had refused to let him comfort her after she'd begun crying. He would adhere to this preference, even if she did not.

She continued on. She replayed the argument in her head, accurately or inaccurately; it did not matter. By the end of the conversation a reptilian dullness had crept into his eyes. It was as if he was persuading himself of his own point of view, of mutual failure.

I used to think you were strange and amazing, he had said. But I wonder how much we have in common. We seem to want different things. Why are we here?

She had stopped crying now, and did not feel sick with panic any more. She felt tender and very alert, as if having risen from a fever, as if driving a new body. There was the reek of kelp all about. Though she was profoundly alone, she felt self-conscious. Observed. To her left, at the top of the rise, the jungle was greenish-brown, oily and complicated, immune to the salt air. It was like a mouth, or many mouths, spitting out the sand that it was relentlessly fed. Now that she was looking up at it, the entity seemed superior to the ocean. The uppermost branches shifted and rustled. Nothing flew above. Nothing flitted in or out. Everything inside was hidden. What was he doing back in their room, she wondered. Repacking his bag, perhaps? Reading a book? Or maybe he was asleep; oblivious to everything, making use of that

shut-off mechanism men could rely upon in such situations.

She walked on. The ocean wind was strong. Grains of airborne sand stung her arms and face. Her dress fluttered. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps they were not in step. Why had she wanted to come here, to a place like this, with its memory of recent troubles? Sub-Saharan gothic, he had joked, a busman's holiday. He had booked two weeks off work, which meant handing an important case over to a colleague. They had flown into Johannesburg, visited a few game parks, photographed giraffe and zebra, then come north. They had arrived at midday and the staff had been friendly. The receptionist had kissed them both three times. They had lain on towels and applied sun-lotion, and had eaten lunch in a cafe in town. They had talked about going up to the ruined lighthouse on the highest dune to see the sunset. But the sense of this being a holiday was somehow absent. There were still signs of the war – abandoned farms, ruins. Now, separate from him, any meaningful frame for being here was gone. She was anomic. The sand was difficult to tread. Her ankle kept turning. She began to feel foolish.

After a while she turned and looked behind again. There was a white form a few hundred metres back

down the beach, where the path to the lodge began. His white linen shirt. Briefly, a sense of elation possessed her. He was looking for her, which meant he was worried. It meant a reversal, perhaps. Should she wait for him or walk on and let him make up the distance? Should she make it easy? She lingered a moment. No. This was his doing. He had instigated their division. He would have to catch up with her. She turned and walked on, not with haste, but purposefully, her steps widening over the dry reefs, the flats of her sandals slapping the soles of her feet. Crabs scattered towards the water. She went about thirty paces. Then she slowed. Perhaps he would not see her so far away. Her dress was pale; she might be indistinguishable against the sand. And she did want to be seen, didn't she? She paused, looked behind again. The white shape was in the same position, perhaps a little closer. She squinted. The surf was creating an illusory fog; the light was thickening. It was difficult to gain focus. She bridged her hands over her eyes.

The shape was low to the ground, and was not particularly large, not elongated like a man. It was not him. Her disappointment was simply confirmation. She knew he would not come. Still, she was annoyed to have hoped, to have permitted the minor

fantasy. The white object was not large, but it was too big to be a seabird. Something mid-sized, then. It was definitely moving; it had velocity, a gait, but she could not tell in which direction it was heading, towards her or away. She peered along the corridor of sand. Towards her. It was coming towards her. She could make out a rocking motion, forwards and backwards, side to side. A creature loping, or running. A spark of alarm fired across her chest. Suddenly there was no air to breathe, though the beach was a cathedral of air. She stood still, lifted a hand to her mouth. A creature running towards her. A creature running towards her. She couldn't move, couldn't make a clear assessment.

There were many dangers here; all outlined in the literature she had received from her health centre. Since arriving on the continent she had retained a prudent fear of the environment. The disease. The bacteria. The wildlife. Not all of it could be washed away, contained, or immunised against. On the way to one of the game parks they had passed an iron-roofed clinic. Outside there had been a long queue of patients. A white doctor was leaning against the clinic wall taking enormous rushed bites out of a sandwich. On the road to the border the traffic had suddenly stopped. After a minute or two the cars

ahead had pulled away and driven on, cautiously. A rhino was on the carriageway. It was grazing unspectacularly on the verge as they crawled past. Its plated torso was earth-coloured. Its eye was a tiny dark recess. Twenty miles later they had passed a woman in the middle of the road, waving her arms up and down. Then they'd seen the body, splayed, folded over itself, made boneless by the impact. A young man, walking to work, perhaps. The debris of his briefcase lay in the oncoming lane.

It was everywhere, close to the surface, or rupturing through.

She turned and walked on, quicker than before. She lengthened her stride. Whatever was behind her might simply have strayed onto the beach, and would cut up into the brush again, leaving her alone. If it was following without motive, or through curiosity, she could probably make it to the headland pass before it came too close. Just walk, she thought. Walk. Don't run.

The drifts were hard going. The dry crust seemed to support her whole weight for a moment then became slack and collapsed and her heels submerged. Sand worked its way between her toes. She walked closer to the shoreline, where the ground was firmer and less abrasive, but still her feet seemed poorly

designed for the task. They were narrow, hoof-like. Her shins ached. The glow on the other side of the trees was fading. Soon even the dusk light would be extinguished. There were no long twilights like at home. Here the shift came swiftly. She walked on. The crabs scuttled away as she approached, or circled about her feet, their claws held aloft. She did not want to look behind again. Nor did she want to imagine what was there. The latter option was worse. The dress she was wearing was low-backed. Her flesh felt exposed. She was all meat, all scent. Had whatever it was gained? Had it materialised properly? A thing born from the jungle: acute and mindless in its predation, glistening-jawed. Her nails dug into her palms as she paced. It might be a breath away from her. Or it might be gone. Turn, she thought. Turn now.

She stopped and turned and the white shape was coming faster, on all fours. A clean bolt of panic struck against her sternum. She wheeled round. Not far ahead volcanic cliffs rose and an uneven stage of rocks began. She began to run; heavy, stumbling steps. It would be the only way she could make the headland, so she could clamber up to a higher, safer place. But it was like running in a dream. The turgid ground, the dreadful incapacity. She pulled herself

forward. She fought the sand. Her thighs burnt, began to seize. Stop, she thought. You have to stop. Showing fear means accepting you are prey. She stopped. She turned and looked back.

It was a dog. A big white dog was coming after her; paws skimming the sand, head held low. It was tracking her. It was engaged in the act, but not at full speed, not in pursuit. She drew herself in, filled her lungs. OK. A dog. A dog was not the worst possibility, even if wild. She'd had the shots, painfully and expensively in the upper arm, there was still a hard lump under the surface, as if a coin had been inserted. And she could recall no reports in the news of tourists set upon and killed by dogs; such a thing must be uncommon. It was war or malaria or road accidents that spawned tragedy. Though she could recall now, luridly, and out of nowhere, the face of that little girl from the north-east, from Sunderland, who had been mauled by the family bull terrier earlier in the year. She could recall her face and neck in the photographs: a grotesque map of welts, flaps and bruises, crescents of black stitches. Then the later pictures: her skull bone grafted over, her nose rebuilt, less striking, surgical disfigurements.

She put her shoulders back, stood her ground, waited for the thing to catch up. When it was within

close range the dog lifted its head and veered to the side, then came into line with her, higher up on the ramp of sand. It stopped. The dog looked down at her. Its eyes were dark, bright. Big paws. It was part Labrador, perhaps, blunt-headed, its fur dirty. There was no collar. Its tongue spooned from its jaw. It looked at her. Its eyes were very, very bright. Under the muddy coat was a distended belly and long black teats. It did not appear emaciated.

She was not usually afraid of dogs. She had had a dog as a child.

Come here, she said. Come. Come here.

The dog dropped its head and came and stood next to her, its warm body pressing against her leg. She put out a hand and let it sniff between her fingers, then she stroked its head, carefully. The fur was damp and gummy. There were lumps on the ears. A stray. But it had once been tame, and it was still tame. Not wild. Not rabid. Biddable. The relief was like stepping into a warm bath. Something within her let go. Her muscles relaxed. She began crying again, though gently, not as she had after the fight. The dog nudged her hand with its head. She petted the dog with the tips of her fingers, combing the sticky fur. It continued to lean warmly against her leg. After a minute she wiped her eyes and walked on again. The dog held back for a moment then

followed and fell in beside her.

You gave me a scare, she said. Listen, I'm not going to keep you.

She continued down the beach with the dog as her companion. She walked slowly. Now and then the dog brushed past and went ahead, then came back to her side. A couple of times it chased after crabs, bounding towards them, knocking clods of wet sand up with its paws and snapping at the angry, fencing creatures. Then it came to her side again, as if demonstrating obedience.

You know where you're going? she asked. Well, you seem to.

She watched the dog. It was nice to watch. It moved deliberately, in accordance with its proclivities. It sniffed seaweed and chased crabs. Then it wanted to be at her side. For no real reason its presence made her feel better. At the headland rocks they both paused and then picked their way along the puddled outcrop. There were pools the shape of hexagons, strange geological structures. At the edge of the headland the ocean washed over them. As they began to round the cliff, the jungle disappeared from sight. The dog stepped through the shallower pools. It lapped some of the water.

Hey, don't drink that.

She thought perhaps the dog would not come up the cliff path but as she began the ascent it followed, bounding up off its back legs onto the boulders. It squeezed past her where the path was almost too narrow for them both, then wanted to lead. The dog trotted ahead confidently, piloting. Perhaps it belonged to someone in the town, she thought, and had just ranged out. In places she had to bend and scrape through bushes. She brushed her shoulders down afterwards, shook out her dress. The rock was volcanic, sculpted into minuscule peaks. Not far below the ocean hawked in and out of eroded gullies. With the sun off it, the water was no longer the intense blue, but colourless.

It took five minutes to round the headland, and then the settlement came into view, the green-roofed cabins on stilts, thatched huts, the seafood bar, and the little blue Portuguese church with its naive Madonna painted on the gable, her figure and head undulating like an expressionist portrait. There were steps carved into the rocks. She walked down them with the dog and walked along the bay to the launching stage, past a few fishermen who nodded at her, and when she arrived at the edge of the town she stopped.

OK. Go home, she said to the dog. Go on.

The dog sat and faced her. Its teats hung from its black belly. Its claws were long and curved and the webs between looked sore. It cocked its head and looked as if it did not understand the command, or as if she might issue another, preferable instruction. In the failing light its eyes were huge. She made her tone firmer.

Go home. Go. Home.

She clapped her hands in front of its face. The dog got to its feet but did not move. She turned her back and walked away. She glanced back. The dog was not following. It was standing in the same spot on the beach, its ears knuckled upwards, watching her. She continued to walk. When she looked back properly the dog was trotting down to the edge of the water, chasing crabs again.

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She did not really know what she was doing, coming into the town. Acting out of anger, but her anger had ebbed now. Though she knew it was relatively safe – Breck, the driver, had vouched for that – she was nervous. She did not want to go back yet. She could not bear the idea of taking up where they had left off. She could not bear seeing him in an altered state,

unmoved by her, his eyes blank. She wanted to sit and have a drink, sit and think. She had to get her mind round the situation, had to assimilate it. She'd probably be able to get a ride back to the lodge complex later; locals seemed amenable to casual work. Or she could walk back along the beach. It would be a clear night by the look of the sky. Let him wonder where she had gone. Let him think about things too, what it was he had said, or tried to say, what it was he might be giving up. He was as trapped here as she was, at least until tomorrow when the Land Rover could be booked. If there was a lover he had not yet admitted to – and she had asked, she had demanded to know – he would not be able to reach her by phone to say, yes, he had begun to break things off. No more than she could reach a friend, or member of her family, to be consoled.

She still did not really understand what was going on. He had said nothing about feeling unhappy previously. Why had she asked him, again and again, what was wrong, instead of taking a nap with him on the bed before dinner? Had her asking created a situation that would not otherwise have existed? If she had not asked him, if she had rested her cheek on his back and her hand on his stomach, and had slept for an hour against his side, would the argument never

have taken place? Would they still be together? They had had sex that morning, in a different bed, in a game lodge further south. The sex had been good; he had initiated it, and when she had taken him into her mouth he had said her name with surprise, as if at a loss, as if helpless, and he had been desperate to be inside her and they had both moved well, automatically, uniformly, and when she had come he had too. He had seemed moved, looking down at her. Did he know then that later in the day he would be saying such damaging things?

What about this morning, she had said during the argument. You felt something for me then, didn't you?

Yes, he said, something. But that's unfair. It's different. Sex is not rational.

They had bickered on the drive up, about nothing important, when to make a rest-stop, whether to buy more bottled water. They had disagreed about whether tourism was a good or bad thing for countries such as this. But the true argument had seemingly come out of nowhere. As if with her arch invitation to speak his mind, she had conjured from a void the means to destroy everything. As if he had suddenly decided it could end. Like deciding he wanted her phone number. Like deciding to get a spare door key cut for her. How easily inverted the world could be. How dual it was.

She made her way along the dirt road towards the cafe. Lights outside the bars were coming on. The evening was still warm. People were sitting drinking beer on the concrete groyne. Three surfers were loading their boards into rusting pick-up trucks. There were locals still trying to sell cashews and carvings. The last of the vendors watched her as she passed by but did not approach. Earlier that day they had made good pitches to them both as they lay on towels reading.

Buy these nuts; they are delicious. Just try one for free and then decide.

Perhaps they could witness the recent distress in her, like looking at a dishevelled tract of land a storm has lately passed through. She walked past the oil drum where the handless man had been sitting. She went into the cafe that they had been in earlier, feeling safer for the vague familiarity. She sat at an empty table and the same waiter approached her, a young man, in his twenties, wearing a yellow and green T-shirt.

Hello again.

Hello.

He greeted her pleasantly, but she could see that he was confused. He kept looking at the door. This was not a resort, if it could yet be called a resort –

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locked in by sand roads, and visited by only a few dozen tourists a week – where a woman would drink alone. She had three hundred rand in the pocket of her dress. She ordered a beer. The waiter nodded and went to the refrigerator and brought one over. He set it down on the table with great care, positioning a glass next to the bottle. She thanked him.

Obrigada.

And to eat?

She shook her head. He nodded and withdrew.

She sipped the beer. She thought about him, and what her life might be like without him. They lived in the same city and saw each other regularly, socialised with each other's friends. Most nights they spent together. They had taken a few trips. This was the most exotic – a twelve-hour flight, prophylaxis and rehydration tablets. They had been getting along fine, she thought. She tried to find any recent tells. Perhaps he had been moody these past few weeks, a little indifferent, stressed at work. He had been curt with her when she said, again, that she wanted to change jobs, that the tours were not what she really wanted to do. But nothing had seemed worrying. She was thirty-one. The thought of going back out, on dates, to parties and clubs, looking for someone, having to generate that intellectual and sexual optimism, made

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her feel tired. She remembered their first night together. He had taken her for a walk in the park by his house, and out for dinner. They had undressed in the living room of his cold flat and had moved to the bedroom only when his flatmate's door had opened. They had barely slept. They were astonished by each other. The next day they had eaten a late breakfast, gone to the cinema, and come back to the flat to collect her necklace. They had had sex again, better, quick and inconsiderate, her underwear taken off, her skirt left on, and then she had gone to work. She had felt extreme happiness. There had been nothing to lose.

She finished the beer and ordered another. The waiter's politeness increased as he took her order. She knew she was making him nervous. But she wanted the anaesthesia, the insulation. She wanted to go back and not to care about losing him. Part of her thought she should stay out, stubbornly, sleep on the beach, or try to make other arrangements, but she did not have the resolve. She had been gone a few hours; that was enough. If it was over, it was over. She took a few more sips, then pushed the bottle away. She put the rand on the table and stood and left the bar.

OK, the waiter called after her. OK. OK, now.

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She felt soft at the edges as she moved, and lesser. Outside the sky was dark, full of different stars. The world seemed overturned but balanced.

A few men called out to her as she walked back towards the beach, not in a threatening way. She did not understand the language and it did not matter what they said. The worst had already happened tonight. In a way she was immune, even from the chill that was beginning. She walked along the beach. It was easier to walk when she felt soft. She was more flexible, more adaptable. There was a quarter moon, brilliantly cut. She could see the shape of the headland and the pale drape of sand leading up to it. The tide had receded. The waves sounded smaller. The crests looked thinner. She could probably walk around the lower section of the cliff now. Beneath everything disastrous, everything menacing, there was honesty. It was beautiful here. She had known it would be. Perhaps that's why she had wanted to come.

As she was walking something loomed up at her side and pushed against her leg. She flinched and stopped moving, then relaxed.

You again.

She petted the dog's head.

Have you been waiting? Look, you're not mine.

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The dog was leaning against her, warmly, familiarly. Its coat in the near darkness seemed cleansed. The dog pressed against her and she put a hand on its back. She had avoided touching it properly before, worried about grime and germs. Now she crouched down and took hold of the dog's ears, then under its jaw, and rubbed.

Is that nice?

There was a fusty smell to the animal. The muzzle was wet and when she lifted it up to look underneath she could see it was dark and shiny.

Hey. What have you had your face in, stupid?

Something viscous and warm. When she took her hands away they were tacky. She knew, before the thought really registered, that it was blood.

Oh no, she said. What have you done? What have you done to yourself?

The dog shook its head. Its jowls slopped about. She wiped her face on her inner arm. Perhaps it had gone off and fought with another dog over some scraps while she was in the bar. Or one of the crabs it had been chasing had pinched it. She took hold of the dog's head again and moved it around to try to find a wound, but it was too dark to see properly. The animal was compliant, twitching a little but not pulling back from her grip. It did not seem to be in pain.

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She stood up and walked to the edge of the water. She took off her sandals and stepped in. A wave came and soaked the hem of her dress. She stumbled, widened her stance. She slapped her thighs and tried to get the dog to come into the surf, but the dog stood on the beach, watching her, and then it began to whine. After a few attempts she came back out.

OK, she said. You're fine. Let's go.

They walked towards the headland and when they reached the rocks they stayed low and began to pick their way around the pools and gullies. This time the dog did not pilot. It kept close, nudging against her legs. When she looked down she could make out a dark smear on her dress. Where the outcrop became more uneven she bent and felt her way using her hands and was careful where she put her feet. The largest waves washed over the apron of rock against her shins. Towards the end of the headland, water was breaking against the base of the cliff. She timed her move and went quickly, stepping across the geometric stones. A wave came in and she heard it coming and held tightly to the rock face as it dashed upwards, wetting her dress to the waist. She gasped. Her body was forced against the rock. She felt one of her sandals come off. Water exploded around her and rushed away. The haul of the ocean was so great

she was sure she'd be taken. She clung to the cliff. Every atom felt dragged. Then the grip released. She lurched around the pillar onto the flat ground, grazing her ankle as she landed. She winced and flexed her foot. She took off the remaining sandal and held it for a moment. Then she threw it away. She wrung out the bottom of her dress. She looked back. The white dog was standing on the other side of the rocky spur, its head hanging low.

Come on, she called. Come on.

It did not move.

Come on, she said. Come on.

The dog stayed on the rocks for a moment and then turned and she could see it was going back the way they had come.

She watched its white body moving. It floated. There seemed to be nothing holding it up. When the shape disappeared she turned and faced the long steep stretch of beach. The ramp of sand disappeared into the black jungle. The white tideline disappeared into the dark body of the ocean. Only the pale boundary was visible. Tideline meeting sand. She began to walk. She could not remember exactly where the hotel path was, about a mile away, but there was a signpost right by it, she knew that. She walked for a long time, feeling nothing but sand

grinding the soles of her feet and chafing her ankles, salt tightening on her skin. She prepared herself. She could accept the end now. She could embrace it. No one was irreplaceable. No one. He could go. She would let him go. She did not like his friends, the smug barristers, the university clique, because they did not like her, because she was not their sort. She did not like his reticence or his conservatism, the way he drove, the way he danced. She would miss the sex, the companionship, until she found someone else. And she would find someone else. Let him join the men of the past. Her old lovers were ghosts. None of them had survived; none were missed.

After a while she stopped. She had come too far. She must have missed the let-out. She doubled back and after a time she saw the small skewed signpost at the top of the dune. She leaned forward and climbed up the bank towards it. Sand spilled backwards, skittering down the slope as she moved. Her legs ached. She felt exhausted. All she wanted to do was lie down and sleep. She sat for a moment at the top of the rise and looked at the ocean – a relentless dark mass. Tomorrow she would probably not see it. Then she stood.

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The entrance of the path was nothing but a void in the jungle. There was still some warmth inside the foliage as she entered. She bent over and felt her way along, through the trees, to the wooden steps and up. She trod carefully. Occasionally she stamped a foot and the noise echoed dully. Under her feet the fine drifts of dust were cold. There was no light, no reflection. She felt invisible. She felt absent. She made her way through the trees, holding her hands out before her and feeling for low-hanging branches. Her eyes adjusted but the darkness continually bled back into their sockets and she had to fight blindness. The birds and the insects were silent. Then, the low-wattage lights of the outer salon tents.

Before she reached the complex she heard aggravated voices. She could not make out the words. She wondered whether he had raised the alarm. She was embarrassed by the thought, by the idea that people might know she had acted rashly, and why. As she came into the clearing where the main lodge was she could see in the external light a group of people standing together. He was not among them. Some of the staff were there, speaking earnestly to each other in Portuguese and an African language. One of them, the woman who had given them their key earlier that day when they checked in, had her arms

wrapped around herself and she was rocking slightly. The fuss was embarrassing.

She thought about slipping back to the tent, unseen. She held back for a moment, and then she approached. They turned to look at her. No one spoke. Then the receptionist cried out, came towards her, gripped her painfully by the arms, and looked towards the men.

Ela está aqui! Ela está aqui!

I went for a walk. On the beach.

The woman released her and took a step backwards and raised her hand as if she might be about to strike her. Then she shook her hand and flicked her fingers.

Você não está morta?

I just went for a walk, she said again. What's happening? I'm alright.

There was a period of confusion. The discussion resumed and broke down. The receptionist shook her hands and walked away, into the shadows. She wanted to leave too, go back to the salon tent, face what she must and then sleep, but the intensity of the situation held her. Something was wrong. Her arrival back at the complex had not lessened their distress. One of the men in the group, the sub-manager, stepped forward. He gestured for her to follow.

THE BEAUTIFUL INDIFFERENCE

She walked with him to the entrance of the main lodge. By the doorway, on the ground, there was a bundle of cloths. They were knotted and blood-stained. The man pushed them aside with his foot, into the corner of the wooden porch. She began to feel dizzy. Heat bloomed up her neck.

What is it? she asked. Has there been an accident?

OK, he said. OK. Come inside.

He went through the door. She followed him into the bar and the man gestured for her to sit at a stool and she sat. His face was damp. He was scratching his arm. She heard others from the group entering the bar behind them.

Ah, he said. OK. Your husband. He was looking around for you. He went to find you. He was very worried. He was . . . there was an attack, you see.

He was attacked? By who?

No. Not a fight. We don't really know how it happened. He was found by George one hour ago. Outside, in the dunes. But he was not conscious. There was a lot of blood. The wound is . . .

He called over to the group of men by the door.

Ei, como você diz tendão?

Tendon.

Yes. The bite is in the tendon of his leg. It's very deep. And a lot of blood is gone. Breck is taking

She Murdered Mortal He

him to the hospital. They will probably have to go to Maputo in the ambulance.

She brought her hands to her face.

Oh my God, she said. Oh my God. I didn't think he would come after me.

Her palms smelled musty, like old meat, like a sick animal. She took them away from her mouth and looked up at the man. He was watching her, nervously. His eyes kept flicking away and back towards her, as if she might react dangerously, as if she might faint or bolt. She shook her head.

What was it? Was it a leopard?

No, he said. No. No. There are no leopards.