

## BRIXTOW WHITE LADY

By Felicity Savage

“Brixtow White Lady” is Felicity’s first fiction sale, and marks her first appearance in print. Since we bought this story, she has sold us several more. She has also sold short fiction to Tomorrow Magazine. On the last day of her freshman year of college, Roc books purchased her first two novels.

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BY THE TIME I GOT OFF THE train in Naivasha, I knew that no matter how far I traveled, I could not escape my crime. The squinting yellow houses of Nairobi; the straining, puffing climb up the Kikuyu escarpment; the moment when I looked down into the vast floor of the valley for the first time, and felt my mind stretch, creaking like an overblown balloon. The long journey from Cobh in Ireland, three months of paranoia carrying over from 1923 to ‘24, lay behind me. No apologetic, lounge-suited fellow had entered my compartment and said, “Excuse me, Lord Dunmanway. I’m from Scotland Yard. If you would answer a few questions . . .”

The train shuddered to a halt; clouds of steam billowed up outside the window. On the platform, two European men shook hands and slapped each other on the back, delighted to meet again. Friends. How Charles would have relished this moment of arrival! A stab of crippling guilt bit into me, so that I had to hold onto the overhead rail and wait for it to pass.

If I had been hanged, the guilt would no longer plague me.

But I do not believe I deserve to die for killing Charles. We were friends for eleven years, bachelors living in a backwater, perfectly suited. Or so I thought. One autumn afternoon as we walked with our dogs in Mallow woods, he confronted me with my secret. We quarreled, I incoherent with fear, he growing furious, until he backed me up against the harebell bank. He pinned my arms with one hand and reached inside my jacket, inside my shirt. His face went red. “My God, Francis! It’s true! Will you deny it now?”

“Please,” I begged. “Don’t tell anyone!”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Anything — I’ll do anything, if we can go on the same as before —”

A look I’ve seen all too often on other men, aimed at some comely young girl, came over his face. “Perhaps there is something.” He pressed against me, a heavy physical presence. “I think I could be persuaded not to tell. You make a pretty woman, you know. Perhaps we can be even better friends than before . . .”

I am not responsible for what happened next. The magic flooded my body. I'd believed it gone: it hadn't stirred since I was thirteen. But now it bloomed and filled me with supernatural strength. I leapt on him, screaming with panic. Thumbs anchored in his nostrils, fingers in his ears, I dragged at his features until they were no longer human. The magic made his flesh like wet clay under my hands. It did not ebb until he lay moving feebly on the crushed harebells, hog-nosed, split-mouthed, blobby trotters coming out of the wrists of his jacket, ears bleeding from the pressure of the changes inside his skull.

I drew back, my joints watery. Unable to bear the bubbling moans that came from his windpipe, I pulled out my pistol and shot him in the head.

Our dogs ripped the remains apart and spread them through the woods.

At the inquest, I testified that I had seen his own hounds turn on him. The dogs were shot. There was no case against me.

But on my return to Dunmanway House, I found my servants fallen away, the whole country rife with suspicion. Hag-ridden, I could neither sleep nor eat. I knew it was folly to stay in Ireland. I wired anyone and everyone who had ever known me or my father. A distant cousin here, an old business acquaintance there.

I chose the most distant of those who replied. Perhaps a new start would help me expunge my guilt.

I manhandled my trunk off the train, wrinkling my nose against the smoke and steam. Scantly clad boys clustered around me, touting their services in pidgin English.

"I don't want a porter. Go away, children." I hefted the trunk in my arms. "This is all the baggage I have."

"Go away, go on, this man is with me." A tall, rugged-featured Somali advanced into their midst, scattering them like guinea fowl. Behind him, a European woman gazed vaguely around the platform. Her face was painted as white as a china doll's. She wore a straight, low-waisted dress with a cardigan; a crocodile clasp bag swung from one hand. Extremely unattractive. But then I find women as a species distasteful. It is not their faults, poor things. Society reduces them to their figures and their faces, weighting their every action with sexuality. That is why I chose not to be one.

"Excuse me. Are you here for Robert Bray?" I asked her. I had never met my cousin, or his wife Thalia.

The woman fixed me with faded blue eyes, the pupils pinpoints. "I'm Chantal Voormilt. Are you Lord Dunmanway?" The clasp bag swung rapidly. "Robby isn't

here to pick you up because everyone's asleep. We were all horrified when Thalia remembered you were coming this morning. It was a tremendous nuisance. The Robertsons left, after all our efforts to make them stay another week, and the Buckleys went too, because Jennie refused to stay if I was going to be the only other woman. Personally, I enjoy having the odds in my favor." She made eyes at me, and continued: "Then Thalia was relieved you were coming, to fill out the dinner table, you know. We were wondering if we would have to drive all the way to the Wanjohi Valley to find company. She insisted I come pick you up."

She obviously did not think she had been rude. I tried to extract the facts from her tirade: "Why...ah...did Jennie leave? I didn't quite —"

"Oh, she came out with it in front of Thalia. I shan't play second fiddle to you any longer, she said. Tom and I are going to the Robertsons' house. Did you ever hear such appalling rudeness?"

"What did Thalia think of it?"

"Say what you will of her, the dear girl is a saint. But actually . . ." Chantal sniggered, a surprisingly boorish sound coming out of that red doll-mouth. "We were at tea. She threw her bread at Jennie's face and called her a Whore of Babylon. Jennie said the pot was calling the kettle black."

My sweet Thalia, Robert had written, looks forward to your visit as if she were a little girl and you Father Christmas arriving in June. A peerless hostess, she is unhappy unless all her guests are settled comfortably . . . I remembered how his writing had wavered across the page.

I shifted the trunk onto one hip and wiped my brow. The train had been hot, but the platform, thick with clouds of steam from the locomotive, was worse.

"What is your Christian name?"

"Francis."

"You poor man, Francis, I'm keeping you standing like a native. How callous of me!" Chantal lashed her bag through the air, narrowly missing the Somali. He took the trunk from my arms and passed it to his personal Kikuyu boy. Chantal led the way out into a cloud of peppery red dust, where cars, drivers, cattle, and urchins wandered. She climbed behind the wheel of a black Buick. "I always drive. Tch-tch. Don't offer. But Abdullah will ride in the back if you want, so you can sit beside me."

In a moment we were underway. The sunshine was surprisingly lenient; the wind rippled through my hair; red dust rolled along the road behind us in sausage-like puffs. Clouds raced above a horizon sharp enough to cut the eye.

“What marvelous light!” I shouted, needing to express my unexpected lightheartedness to someone.

“Oh, yes. You should see it when the sun sinks. The air is like honey. Or if you’re on safari, and you get up early, and go down to the river to wash your face . . .” Here she appeared to lose the thread of her sentence. She frowned, wrinkling her porcelain brow, and took one hand off the wheel to massage the opposite forearm. “One P.M., that’s early. We usually have pink gins when we get up, and save the whiskies for later. Thalia does a fantastic whiskey sour. Limes and God knows what else she puts in it. What’s your poison, Lord Dunmanway?”

Perhaps the altitude was at fault. I found it exhilarating, almost a stimulant. The Aberdare hills were very much like the mountains of Kerry: above the road, the same breathtaking rock formations rose out of the same steep spurs covered with forest. Silver lines arrowed down the escarpment. The clear light transformed the landscape, so that I almost convinced myself the peaks were huddled giants who had slumbered so long trees had grown up over them. Now and again the odor of wood-smoke blew past my nostrils.

But there was no sign of human habitation. “Most of the farming is done in the valley, around Gilgil,” said Chantal. “If you live up here, it’s a sign that really you can’t be bothered with the petty things of life.”

The Buick wound higher and higher along a road with a sheer drop on one side. With every foot we climbed, my spirits rose higher.

“It’s horrendous in the rain,” said Chantal.

We arrived at Brixtow at four. A modest thatched mansion, shaded by jacaranda, hidden away in a cleft of mountain whose walls towered sixty feet and kept out the sun. Chantal brought the Buick to a halt, spraying gravel. I sniffed the air. The scent of mimosa was dizzying. But underneath it, surely that was a lady’s perfume?

“She could have waited for us. I did want a cocktail,” Chantal said, and hurried inside.

I looked around for Robert.

Half a dozen Kikuyus leaned in the various doorways, silent as black marble columns.

Seeing my bemusement, Abdullah got out, stretched his long body, and said: “You may wish to go inside, Lord Dunmanway. Mrs. Bray’s room. You will be able to tell which it is.”

The lobby was furnished with sofas loose-covered in chintz. Cut-glass trays stood on every available surface, overflowing with cigarette butts. In places the carpet was stained. I passed onto a veranda. The mansion was C-shaped, partially enclosing a courtyard with a fountain: on the far side of the spray, lush dark greenery climbed into the back of the cleft. I tiptoed along the veranda, catching whiffs of tobacco smoke, wine, and vomit. At last I smelt Chantal, and heard male laughter from behind a door. I lifted aside the screen.

“Lord Dunmanway! Francis! Come in.” A broad-shouldered fellow with small features and fair hair grasped my shoulder, pulling me into the room. A bathroom. Chantal Voormilt and half a dozen men slumped against the silver fixtures, cocktails in hand, apparently recovering from some hilarious joke. A tub edged with silver and black tiles was sunken into the middle of the floor. Beside it knelt a Somali girl in a red and yellow dress, pouring hot water from a ewer. Thalia — it could be no other — lay with her pale breasts rising from the oiled surface, a gin fizz in one hand, caressing the fox-terrier that sat on the tiles beside her head.

How could I have known that the most striking individual I have ever seen would be hidden away in the depths of Africa?

It does not do her justice to say that she had coils of teak-colored hair, piled above a smooth white forehead; eyes as blue as sapphires dredged up from Lake Victoria; dark crescent moons for brows; a nose as small and neat as any Botticelli Madonna’s. But how can one describe beauty except through the minutiae?

I gulped for air, staggered, and sat down on a folding chair that the fair man pushed under me.

“Cousin Robert?” I said weakly.

“That’s me.” Robert knocked his cigarette on Chantal’s sleeve to get her attention. “Chanty, have you heard the latest one that’s going the rounds in Nairobi? It’s about me and Longly.

There was a young girl of the Mau

Who said she didn’t know how.

She went for a cycle with Robby and Michael

She knows all there is to know now.

Isn’t that beyond the pale? Don’t you adore it?”

I cleared my throat. Thalia looked my way. Meeting her gaze felt like baring oneself to a waterfall — the pounding is bracing, but one knows that before long it

will break one down. Her beauty was not only in her features, but in her gracefulness, and the naked appraisal of her gaze. “Are you planning to stay for supper, my lord? Shall I tell the servants to lay another place? Or have you only stopped for a minute?”

“Point well taken, madam.” I shrugged out of my coat and hat. “I was planning to stay for several suppers. I haven’t long-range plans yet.”

“We’ll have to see how amusing you can be before we agree to that. None of us at Brixtow wants a bore here. Conviviality is one of the things I demand my guests have. I’m very good at panning house parties.”

“I’m sure, madam.”

“I hate men who condescend!”

“No offense, madam. As for being a bore, I’m afraid I can’t discuss art, don’t know anything about the classics, can’t fly a plane, can’t sing, only play the piano, and that not well. Does that disqualify me?”

“Oh dear, I don’t think you will fit in here. Whenever we’re not giving each other lessons in Greek and Italian, or talking about our collections of priceless art, we careen around the Aberdares in fighter planes left over from the War.”

Her eyes sparkled. I twitched a smile off my face. I did not want to get along with her.

“Well, he has to have a certain absolute value,” a stout, red-mustached man said. “Warm body, and all that.”

There was a ripple of laughter. I glanced at Robby. He had sunk to the floor beside me, legs crossed awkwardly at the ankles. His tongue protruded from one corner of his mouth; he was in the act of digging a silver syringe into his arm. I looked up. No one seemed to have noticed. If they had, they didn’t find it anything out of the ordinary.

“Thallie,” Chantal said, “you’re a shocking hostess. Your cousin hasn’t got anything to drink.”

Thalia giggled. “I’m in the bath.”

“What difference ought that to make?”

“You know, Chantal, you’re quite right. Margot!” Thalia snapped her fingers. The maid came forward, silent and neat-footed between the spills of scented water, and extended a giant Turkish towel. Thalia stood up in the bath, exposing herself

down to a triangle of dripping, nutmeg-colored pubic hair. “Get my dress ready. The pink with the silver panniers. Everyone out. Shoo — shoo! Go on! You too, Chantal.”

The guests filed out of the bathroom. Red-mustache shut the door behind them. Panic squeezed my gut: I felt the magic stir like a snake inside my body. Since I killed Charles it had made itself felt many times: in a situation like this, I was afraid it would break loose again. Thalia, wrapping a towel about herself African style, squatted beside a marble chest in the corner and mixed me a cocktail. “Here, Lord Dunmanway, is a Brixton Special White Lady. Savor it.”

As she was putting away the bottle, she caught my nervous gaze. One corner of the exquisite mouth tugged upward.

“You leave me speechless, madam,” I said.

“I can’t get over the way you talk! Fairshante — that’s the fellow who said you were a warm body, I’m not quite sure whether it was a compliment or not —” she laughed loudly — “he’s Earl of Gloucestershire, so he ought to sound plummy as anything. But his accent isn’t as delicious as yours. Something happened to it since he left Eton.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I didn’t go to Eton.” Her head tilted in disbelief. “No, I swear it. I grew up alone with my father, on our estate in Southern Ireland.”

“Well! I grew up in a little village, and escaped to London as soon as possible. You’re very reserved. I suppose that comes of not going to Eton. All the boys play with the other little boys, you know, and it creates such an unhealthy atmosphere when it comes to punishment.”

She sounded perfectly innocent. But what if the Brays had already judged me by reading the accounts of the Mallow murder case in the papers? The prospect was too awful to contemplate. I forced my voice to its usual tenor. “How much news do you hear from Home?”

“Not much.” She made a moue. “Not much at all. And it tends not to be very interesting. I use the papers for the bottom of my parakeets’ cages.”

She passed into her bedroom, greeted by a flurry of bright little pet birds. I slumped against the wall, loosened my collar, ran my fingers around my hairline to catch the trickles of sweat.

IN MY HEAD, that evening tinkles against my other memories like a glass bauble. The paneled British-style dining room rang with laughter. We were all half drunk before we started eating. Thalia most of all. Because of that, or in spite of it, I found the jokes unusually witty. As a rule I avoid alcohol. Chantal and Sam Voormilt had

unforeseen artistic talents. They climbed on the table and did a song and dance routine to the tinny phonograph.

The servers glided in and out with dishes done to a turn. Robby sat out, eating nothing, occasionally volunteering a rude limerick. He was a very heavy morphine user. It cannot have been good for his health.

Williams — an American who was visiting from Boston on the strength of having known Robby ten years ago — seemed the most sensible of the lot. During the fish he said to me, “He’s in paradise, you know.”

“Who, Robby?”

“That’s my theory. We’re only really happy in our dreams, see, and morphine makes the whole world into a living dream.”

“Do you use it?”

He cut a neat slice of marlin. He garnished it with butter, salt and pepper, then put it into his mouth. “There are limits. Even in Kenya.”

Watching him chew the fish, round head nodding at each bite, I wanted to gag. I excused myself. Chantal was already outside. We retched into the fountain. “That’s what it’s there for,” she said between spasms.

“I should hate to be the servant who has to clean it out.”

“That’s what they’re there for.”

“What are we here for?” I asked, trying to be friendly. I’d winced for her many times during supper. Discussing women’s fashions, Thalia had repeatedly used Chantal as a bad example.

“What a deep question.” She sat on the rim of the fountain, head silhouetted against the stars at the top of the cleft. The cries of hoopoes and nightjars blended like music, ten, a hundred times more immediate than the wailing of the phonograph from inside the screens. Because I am female, I cannot restrain these poetic fancies: they were one of the clues that led Charles to guess the truth.

“I’ve thought about it a lot. And I conclude that we have no other purpose on this earth than to provide excitement in Thalia’s life.” The shingled head bobbed emphatically.

“All of us!”

“She deserves adulation. Anyone who looks like her must. But her women



guests usually can't understand that — they waste their time envying her. Whereas the men wait around forever, hoping they will be chosen for the battleground. That's what we call her bed."

"What about you and Sam?"

"Oh —" a mulish toss of the head — we just come for the dinners."

I knew better in Sam's case, of course, and I believed I knew better about Chantal too.

"Do you know why she didn't send you packing this afternoon, when you acted so dim?"

"Because I've come all the way from Ireland for a visit?"

"Silly! Because she chose you the minute you walked in the door."

My breath caught in my throat. I had forgotten how terrifying the threat of intimate contact was. How the heat stopped, the blood congealed, and prickles ran over the skin under the dinner jacket. I hadn't been so frightened since Charles' attempt at sexual blackmail.

I went inside and had another drink, and another, and another.

"Now, I'm closing my eyes. And when I open them. . . ."

Thalia's hands shuffled busily in her little lacquered bedside table, arranging the room keys in pairs. We waited breathlessly, crowded into her bedroom, clutching our whiskies. "Do you suppose this is how God decides things when there's a war?" said the red-mustached Fairshante. "Odd man out, off to the battleground with you!" He broke out in heavy laughter.

The dark embroidery-silk lashes lifted the tiniest fraction. Thalia placed the last pair of keys. Then she opened her eyes, licked her shining lips, and read out the tags.

"Thalia Bray and Francis Dunmanway."

Well, I had been warned. But that didn't prevent my pulse from racing. Someone slapped me on the back and said I'd been the odds-on favorite.

"Chantal Voormilt and Williams. I've never got round to asking whether you have another name, Willy?"

"Nosir I haven't!" Williams jiggled like a blancmange inside his suit. Clearly he

had never been chosen to play the game before. He flicked a glance toward Chantal and said diffidently, "Shall we . . .?" as if he were asking her to dance.

"What about Sam?" I said.

Chantal advanced with a determined, lurching stride. "Sam doesn't mind. Why should he mind? He'll just stay there until daylight, happy as a sandflea, while you and I, Willy Willy, keep ourselves warm."

We roared with laughter. I don't know why. Perhaps because Sam had passed out in the corner of the dining room with one shoe off and one shoe on.

"Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John," Thalia said pensively. Then she shook herself. "Haven't you kissed her yet, Williams? Come on, play the game! That's better. What's the number on your key? Four? That's on the other side of the courtyard . . ." Her voice faded as she passed out of the veranda door, herding Williams and Chantal ahead of her, trailing the other men like a string of disappointed ducklings. One of them grinned at me and made an obscene comment as he shut the door.

I took a deep breath. I was alone with twelve sleeping parakeets in a lady's bedroom.

Charles' voice came to me: "Women are like dogs, Francie. Can you know what your hound is thinking? You cannot. And a lovely little Pekingese, for example, or a prize spaniel, has even less in its head than an ugly Irish collie. Now, imagine that the Pekingese were able to talk to you! And you have a portrait of any beautiful woman you care to name. My late wife, for example, God rest her soul." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and threw another log on the fire. It was Christmas of 1922. Why couldn't I have seen that he already knew my secret — that in his oblique way, he was trying to goad me into revealing myself? If I had understood, the magic might never have been reawakened.

"Night! Nighty-night! Don't forget, you can always crawl in with each other if you feel lonely, boys!"

"Thallie!" It was Robby's slurred voice. "Wife, come here!"

I startled. I blew out the lamp nearest the window and pressed my hands to the screen, framing the two figures. She stood near the window, graceful even when she was motionless. He circled the fountain toward her, backlit by the lamps on the far veranda. Brute menace was in the set of his shoulders and the swing of his fists. "Thallie, you aren't to go to bed with that man."

"You're being a silly drunk, Robby. It's just a game."

“It’s not a game. It’s your whole life. Do you know what they call you at the Muthaiga Club? And at every house in the country?” He sneered. “The Whore of Gilgil.”

He would have seized her by the shoulders, but she ducked away.

“Please go to bed, Robby.” Her voice was shaky. They circled each other. I prayed Robby would succeed in claiming his marital rights: I dreaded her coming. “I’ll see you in the morning, darling,” she said. “I love you.”

“Then come to bed with me!”

“Do you want to know why I don’t sleep with you, Robby? Do you really want to know?” Her voice scaled higher. “Because you stink. Your body is pocked with heroin abscesses. You’re killing yourself and I wish you would do it faster and get it over with, because I hate you, I hate you, I hate you —”

He rushed at her. With a strangled cry she ducked away and ran. I drew back from the window and she rushed in like a gust of wind, trailing the scent of Chanel and whiskey. She slammed the door, fell against it and burst into tears.

“Don’t take it too seriously,” she managed to get out through her sobs. “We have the same fight, this fight, every time he gets drunk. I hate him. I hate him.”

Outside, Robby splashed his face in the fountain. Then I heard footsteps staggering away. A door slammed.

“I hate him!”

“Lie down, Thalia.” I began edging toward the door. The alcohol had begun to leave my head, and I had cold feet. All I could think about was getting away. “I’ll fetch you a drink.”

“I don’t want a drink.” Her gaze burned through the tears. “I want you.”

“No, you don’t.” I was almost at the door. “Will I have to tell you why?”

“To hell with your confessions!” She came at me, pushed me against the column of the four-poster and buried her face in my jacket. “I don’t want to know when your mother died, who you first had a pash on, how bloody beautiful I am! They all tell me everything, everything, and I’m so burdened . . . so burdened . . . imprisoned. . . . I just want to fuck you.”

She wrenched at her pink satin gloves, hurled one then the other at the parakeet cage. “Don’t be shy. We don’t expect proper behavior from you -not like at Home. This is the wilderness.”

“Wait!” I pulled away. “Don’t you know I’m a murderer?”

“Of course I do. Credit me with a little self-interest.” She sat down on the bed, picked up one foot and began to peel off the stocking. “We agreed we wouldn’t mention the Mallow case to you. It doesn’t matter, even if it was rather gory. Everybody who comes to Kenya is running away from something. Why, even Williams, who didn’t want to kiss Chantal (not that I blame him), he committed bank fraud back in the States. That’s the thing: you’re handsome, you’re mature, and you may or may not have killed a man.” She snuggled against me, arms snaking around my neck, and kissed me full on the mouth.

A flash flood of sensation rushed through my body. The magic uncoiled and stretched. Terrified, I pushed her away.

Shadow pooled in the hollow of her collarbone as she stretched one arm toward me. The hoopoes cried piercingly on the veranda. Her voice came from deep within her. “Come here.”

“You’ll be sorry. Just wait and see.” I yanked off my jacket. Haste made my fingers clumsy. Button by button, I undid my shirt and tugged my vest over my head. Last of all I unknotted the strip of cotton that keeps my breasts flat. Shame suffused my face with heat. “See? You don’t want me —”

Her eyes were wide, like little cameos, reflecting my nakedness. “Oh my God. How absolutely incredible. But of course . . .”

“Of course?”

“How could I have thought your face belonged to a man? Those cheekbones . . .” Soft, hot hands fastened on my shoulders. She pushed me back onto the bed. “Those lips . . .” She kissed me again, for a longer time.

“Stop!” I writhed away, pressing my face into the counterpane.

“What’s wrong? Haven’t you ever made love to a woman before?” One finger traced up and down my quivering spine. “No, you haven’t.” Her voice shook a little. “How is this?”

She kneaded my shoulders.

“This?”

“Stop it!”

Her hands ceased to move. “Tell me why you’re living like this, Francis.”

“My father wanted a son.” I found it difficult to concentrate. She bent and kissed my cropped hairline, and her dark locks swung in front of my eyes. “My mother died when I was born, and Father treated me as a boy from the first, although naturally he couldn’t send me to public school. We lived alone in the Irish countryside. None of his acquaintances knew I wasn’t what he said. And since I didn’t have a female nurse, I wasn’t sure of the difference myself.”

“What happened when you got your monthlies?”

“I didn’t know.” I shuddered. “My God, I might as well have been turning into an ape! I was so frightened! The servants twigged pretty quickly. One summer day, the son of my father’s manservant, a boy my own age, decided to enlighten me as to what I was becoming. That included both of us taking our clothes off. You can guess what the next step was.”

“Yes, I think I can.”

“You can’t possibly.”

“He raped you. Poor little Francis, shivering in the summer sun. And ever since, you’ve been afraid it will happen again. Well, not tonight it won’t.” She stroked my neck. “Let Thallie make it better.”

Eighteen years of deception, holding the magic in, blindly denying it. I killed the boy, reduced him to bleeding, bubbling jelly. Then I ran weeping to the stream that flowed through the grounds, where I washed myself raw. My father hushed up the boy’s death. Make it better! I wanted to laugh.

“I like making love to women.” Thalia sounded both shy and bitter. “Men call me their goddess, and then they have to own me in order to feel safe. They fight over me like dogs with a bone. And I end up broken into little pieces. That’s why I left London. Here, there are few enough men that every jackass knows that if he waits, he’ll get his turn.”

“Poor Thalia,” I said sincerely.

“Don’t pity me! Just make me feel the way I make them feel. Make me free.” Her weight came down gently on my back. She had taken off her blouse. Her nipples burned spots on my shoulders.

The magic overflowed my body, tossing me from side to side, lifting me off the bed.

Had I ever thought to control it? No. The other times, deep down inside I hadn’t wanted to control it. Now when I did, I realized the true power of my

instincts.

I pinned Thalia down as I had pinned Charles, grasping her face with both hands, and where my fingers pressed her temples the skin was pouring into soft folds, spilling over her hair.

Not again! I won't repeat my crime!

Feverishly I pulled back. I took a deep breath.

The fox-terrier whined at the door; the parakeets chirped plaintively. Far off, a lion coughed.

The border between myself and the outside world had never seemed so breakable. It had never been so important to keep it intact.

I touched my forefinger to Thalia's neat nose and stroked upwards, ever so gently moving skin and cartilage.

She stopped weeping. She lay supine, not struggling, the tendons of her arms spasming from time to time under my knees. Now and again as I re-molded her face, she whimpered with the pain. The jewel-blue eyes overflowed with tears. The water coursed down the sides of her face until I re-formed her ears so that they stuck out far enough to catch it.

"I just wanted to make love to you," she said. Her voice was squeaky, jerky with pain, a far cry from the liquid tones I remembered. "Do I deserve this?"

"Don't talk, please. I don't want to hurt you."

"You are hurting me." She jerked. "Rather badly."

"Can't stop now." I touched her eyelashes, teased them until they were dirty brown, and moved on to the roots of her hair. The parakeets screeched, filling the room with their racuous voices. The power surged like a flood tide. "I'm trying not to do any damage. I think — I hope — you'll thank me for this."

"Thank you?"

"Please be quiet. It's too late to stop now."

I GOT UP at four in the morning and packed the Buick with things I thought we might need: clothes, food, money. Then I woke Thalia into her new life. She only cried a little before she conceded there was no question of staying at Brixton any longer. We drove several miles up the road before we felt safe enough to stop and have breakfast. Fresh rolls, cold salmon, papaya, and fresh-roasted Kenyan coffee

made short work of our hangovers. My hunger distracted me from the real question at hand: where were we to go now? I ate, and ate, and looked out over the tops of the mimosa trees into the hazy blue basin.

“I feel sorry for Robby,” Thalia said. She sat on the patch of grass we’d flattened, wearing a dowdy skirt and blouse. Dirty-porridge waves spilled to her shoulders, and her hairline was low to her eyebrows. She had light brown eyes with stubby lashes, wide and frank. A snub nose. Her mouth was too wide, her lips too thin for beauty. Her jaw looked almost masculine. This was what I’d done to her. “He won’t realize this is for his good. At least, not when he crawls out of bed and finds me gone. Maybe a few months down the road. I ruined him.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“He couldn’t give me the freedom I wanted. So I took it. He couldn’t bear that either, so he turned to morphine. And now I look back on our life, I see I wasn’t even free.”

“Every woman is under some man’s thumb.”

“It’s easy for you to make pronouncements, Francis . . . Did you ever think of having a go at it yourself? Being a woman, and refusing to be imprisoned?”

“No. Not really.”

“Then perhaps you ought to try it now. What have you got to lose?”

“Everything!”

“Nothing. Anyway, I think you owe it to me. Oughtn’t you to alter yourself as drastically as you altered me? Even if by more mundane means?”

She tugged on a strand of mousy hair, touched her new, heavy eyebrows.

I bowed my head. “I do owe you that.”

She stood. “We can find out how you would look, at any rate. Come down to the car. I saw you put plenty of my clothes in, and we’re practically the same height.”

We walked down to the car. She rooted in her trunk. “A sea-green blouse and a linen skirt?” I said incredulously.

“That’s right. You can change behind that thorn tree.”

It is astonishing what a difference clothes make to one’s self-image. I felt

naked, uncertain, shy, yet at the same time deliciously free, the way I used to feel at night when I would take my breast band off. The thorn tree was in flower. Daringly I picked a spray of blossom and tucked it behind my ear, breathing in the heavy scent.

“Oh Francie!” Thalia clapped her hands. Then she came forward and adjusted the flower so that it bobbed in front of one eye. “When your hair grows a bit longer, you can get a perm. You’ll be at the height of fashion. I’m terribly out of date with my long hair.”

I had never expected to feel this free. Impulsively, I leaned forward and kissed her. She stopped me. “Don’t.”

“You mean, you only ever make love to people once? Are you afraid of getting any closer?”

“I didn’t say that.” There was a pause, then she said, “I thought we would go back to London.”

“I see. It’s because I’m a woman. And that’s not acceptable.” On the other side of the grass, in the thorn bushes, I heard water rushing. Crimson and blue and green birds flirted across the sky, and just above the grass, insect wings flashed. I never wanted to leave this country. “I’m older than you, Thalia,” I said, “and I’ve had time to become disenchanted with human nature. For a man, living in Britain was bearable. I stayed on my estate, scarcely speaking to a soul. For a woman, society’s biases would be intolerable. We couldn’t even be ourselves, never mind being with each other.”

“I’ve been in Kenya too long,” she said. “Europe is the place to be. If not London, then Paris or Venice. This is the age of freedom. Women are treated with equality.”

“Oh, if you only knew!” We had reached the Buick again. I leaned my elbows on the bonnet, facing out into the valley. “No woman knows what she’s being cheated of until she has had it. And now I’m giving it up, I don’t want the loss rubbed in my face.”

“You’re wrong.” Tears shone in her eyes. “The only thing that imprisoned me was my beauty.”

“I won’t go back.” My voice was steady. I could not believe what I was about to say. “Maybe we should part. I’m not sure we’re suited.”

“No, Francis!” She hugged me. We stood pressed together in the middle of the road, hip to hip, breast to breast. In light of the sensation that prickled through my body, I realized that it made sense not to kiss her. Too many other tensions would come into play. In a sexual relationship, we would end up hating each other.



We had to find solid ground to stand on before we could reprise last night. Yet I didn't warn to eliminate the possibility, as we would have to in a society that called it taboo.

"I don't think I can stand to give up civilization," she said.

I laughed. "I've given up on civilization."

"This may sound hypocritical — but I don't want to give you up." Her heart beat fast. I chewed my lip, trembling with fear. I knew that as we stood, unembarrassed in our true forms, we didn't belong in the world of men. But how could I make Thalia see?

"Please come back to London!" she said. "You can't not give it a try!"

Over her shoulder, the bend in the road beckoned to me, green-shad-owed, awash with dapples of sunlight. I started to speak.

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