

Harry Gossamer, Consultant Extraordinaire

Harry Gossamer's head snapped back so hard at the sound of his own snore that he nearly cried out in pain. Rubbing the back of his neck, he surreptitiously scanned the faces of the local consultants, trying to gauge their reactions, but saw none. He hoped he hadn't been sleeping long and prayed he hadn't mumbled the name of the luscious underage prostitute who'd been consulting with him most of the previous night. She'd promised to bring another girl this evening. He'd have to close this meeting early if he was going to get any shut eye and be ready for play time tonight. So far, Dar es Salaam was revivifying his old bones in ways he'd hadn't dare hope.

He stretched. Even his skeleton looser and more fluid than he could remember, tendons unfolding in subtle sequence, in smooth, controlled response. It wasn't just the sultry heat of Dar at work on his deepest self, the subtle invitation to relax exuded from the bountiful flowers and seacoast atmosphere. He smiled. The relaxation was so deep it was almost spiritual. A man like him, a man of action and accomplishment, rarely thought of things in spiritual terms, but the rightness of this moved him.

He was relaxed, but strong with the strength that came from male dominion over all things submissive, weak and female, energy born from satisfying a deeper lust for command he'd forgotten he still had. It was the maleness of conquest returning, the maleness he'd relinquished when he retired ten years ago. He'd forgotten what it was like to feel the eyes of desiring females lifting, lighting, luring; how he'd straightened, invigorated, subtly strengthened in response. Intercourse, social and otherwise, could keep a man young,

awake, alive. Connected again. Only Prudence hadn't admired him. She'd scoffed at his less-than-sharp – wooly, if he was honest – consulting skills.

Last night, after the magic pill began to kick in, the mere sight of her bare bottom had given him an erection. She was breathtakingly beautiful, elfin, childlike yet knowing, with dimples that gave her a devilish, mocking air, inviting, off-putting, accepting, dizzyingly contradictory, a sassy bundle of delight. Yet she was delicate, a nude sculpted in dark chocolate, rich but soft, the rounded curves of her body edged with a silvery light emitted by her skin's natural sheen.

He'd actually salivated when she'd walked toward the bed from the bathroom, tossing the towel that covered her to one side while she raised the leg closest to him and bent bending the knee ever so slightly to give him a glimpse of the luscious tendrils of hair peeking at him from beneath her thigh. Curved chocolate tasted infinitely better than straight; it melted in the mouth differently, releasing molecules of taste onto the tongue and into the nose. He'd drawn a deep, almost convulsive, breath and grabbed at his chest, afraid the movement he felt signaled the start of heart failure, literally and figuratively.

But the sight of his glorious erection spurred him on with slow abandon. He'd anticipated the revitalizing benefits of dark chocolate consumed many times before in Africa, especially when he consulted in Tanzania, where the HIV rates were lower. The girl had not let him down. Why, a round with an underage African prostitute was like drinking from the Fountain of Youth! It lowered cholesterol, improved heart health, and help prevent cancer. Even his wife couldn't argue with that. And he could see, already, the improvements in cognitive function bedding this brown bitch was bringing. This girl was superfood. The

results were visible after only a week of melding with this Easter bunny sculpted gift of luscious, lurid life.

This morning, he'd been planning to nail her one more time before he showered and went to the meeting, but no matter how hard he'd cocked his rifle, the Viagra had worn off. He could only manage semi-hardness. She'd giggled at the sight of his half-mast penis and managed to suck him off one last time. He'd drifted back to sleep, grateful he'd scheduled this first meeting for ten.

The shower had helped, but it hadn't entirely removed the sweet musky smell of her young body. He was sweating profusely now, the heat of the small, stuffy office rousing more than the memory of her animal scent. He felt like he was hallucinating, and fought hard to bring his mind back into focus. It was time to rally the troops for action and bring this meeting to a close so he could go get his nap.

"Okay, team. I know you were all very fond of Prudence, but we have to do the best we can now that she's out of the way . . . I mean, now that she's been called back to Washington headquarters. Once we're over the first hurdle, I'm sure that things will go more smoothly than they have."

Fatima stared at him as he struggled to maintain his train of thought. To keep his train on the tracks. To articulate even one clear thought. "Like I said" – he tried to stand for emphasis – "we'll be in the field for three weeks . . ." He sank down, suddenly exhausted, rubbed his brow with the back of his hand, and slurped from his glass of water.

"Like I said," he slurred, "we have three weeks . . ."

Fatima leaned forward, narrowing her eyes. “Harry, are you all right? You seem very tired this morning.”

He cleared his throat apologetically. “I was on the phone all night with Washington, planning our next steps. Now that Prudence has been terminated, we have to be very strategic to make sure our deliverables are on schedule.” He didn’t add, “since she did most of the work,” a thought – when he allowed himself to have it – that paralyzed him. But it was too late. He’d assumed that the local consultants would rally around him, but as he felt their expressionless eyes on his face, he wasn’t so sure.

He’d set Prudence up for the fall and the local consultants knew it, but it was hard to read their reactions. “If we take everyone’s individual reports right now, we can gauge where we stand with the work as a whole. Maybe you can organize that for me, Fatima.”

Harry hadn’t paid attention to the work, but he knew Fatima had and with a little prodding would pitch in and absorb Prudence’s workload. Extraordinary what local consultants would do to keep these big international contracts! One word from him would ruin their business prospects for a very long time.

The truth was, Harry Gossamer, development consultant extraordinaire – he liked to think of himself as a sophisticated man worthy of dramatic superlatives; he did, after all, travel frequently, advising US missions all over the world on key matters of international aid – had hoped Prudence would attend one last meeting before she left the country this morning to work with the locals to set a final course for the work. But at breakfast she’d smiled at him demurely, murmuring that since she’d been ordered by the firm to “lay down

her tools,” she was heading poolside for one last blast of paradise before she was shunted home.

He was pretty sure she’d noticed him saying his goodbyes to his luscious young chocolate delight as she passed them at the bottom of the stairs on his way to breakfast that morning – the twelve-year-old who’d been warming his bed every night since he’d arrived in Tanzania, but Prudence’s breakfast face told him nothing. She’d wished him luck, swore she understood his decision to stay on with the work, and left him trying to swallow – choking? Jesus, Harry! Get a grip! – swallowing his perfectly poached eggs, cooked not too hard and not too soft, just as he directed the chef prepare them each morning since he’d arrived, wondering how he could pull the whole thing off without her. For the first three weeks of their engagement, his only contribution had been editorial, a contribution Prudence had rightfully trivialized.

“I wish you luck with the job, Harry,” Prudence said cheerfully. “I don’t envy you. This is going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better.” She stuck her hand out for a friendly shake, friendly but considerably cooler than yesterday morning’s comradely hug, when they’d declared their intention to protest of Washington’s decisions by quitting immediately. She’d kept her promise. He hadn’t. “Hope you get home in one piece, Harry.”

Harry’d played the pity card hard and pledged to quit too. He’d squeezed out some tears to show sympathy for her own when they told the local consultants they were leaving, testifying on both their behalves to the frustration their headquarters’ treachery had caused. “Prudence worked tirelessly,” he’d declared to the group. “As the only member of a four-person team on the ground, it was almost impossible for her to keep up with the work

before I arrived. But she did it nevertheless. When we learned that HQ had postponed our meeting this morning without talking with us first, we had no choice but to quit. I've never seen a company behave so poorly in all my years of consulting." Eleven to Prudence's 25, he thought. She had never held a real job like he had for so many years, traveling the world in the name of peace justice and the American way. Retired now, he cadged down a few jobs a year, using his authority to play while other team members worked.

He'd even managed to choke up when he'd called her later that day, letting his voice crack several times when he told her how sorry he felt that headquarters had talked him into staying in spite of his pledge to resign as soon as she had. At headquarters' urging, and with their collaboration, he'd delayed her planned resignation. "I'll think of some bullshit to tell Washington," he'd told her, "and then we'll tell the Mission the truth before we leave." She'd trusted him, confused and bruised by two and a half weeks of 12-hour days making up for HQ's logistical mistakes.

By the time Headquarters had reached her later that afternoon, she'd already learned what they planned when SwissAir told her HQ had changed her plane reservations to return the next day. He had to admit she took it well, laughing as she climbed back into the SUV behind the driver. Harry had commandeered the front seat of the Land Cruiser the first day he'd arrived, handing her his books and packages to stow in the back. He'd taken charge, that's for sure, in no uncertain terms. It was important to show women their place. He knew that from experience. He'd poached on Prudence's authority right from the start so she wouldn't get in the way of his plans.

By god, she deserved it. He could tell Prudence was going to be trouble when she'd called him out for leaving work early the previous Friday afternoon, but he'd claimed he needed to get back to the hotel so he could call his wife in the States before the time changed. He allowed himself a small ironic smile. It was always easy to mislead female colleagues. They fell for all their own ideals, and wanted to trust so badly. All it took was finding out which ideals they held. Prudence prescribed to the sanctity of marriage vows in addition to integrity on the job. You could tell from her modest swim suit and the endless hours she worked trying to keep up with the load HQ had dumped on her. She was tiresome, old-fashioned, and sooner or later she was going to rain on his parade.

He sighed heavily, urging his local team to work even harder to make up for the "gaps" Prudence had left. They grunted and disappeared into their cubicles as he headed for the large office they'd reserved for him. He flipped his computer open and began playing double solitaire. It always calmed him before a nap; he didn't want to take a valium because the "team" was scheduled for a meeting with the client that afternoon and a call to HQ later in the day. He'd have to get through those with some ration of dignity – no one could blame him if he was still disturbed by Prudence's termination – before he got a second nap, his Viagra, and his lady friends were discreetly delivered to the hotel door by taxi.

The girls here were almost as good as the ones he'd bedded in Afghanistan when MI6 hired him to kill Taliban at \$200 a head. He hadn't needed Viagra back then. The adrenalin was enough to keep him going. When Prudence had recoiled in horror at that anecdote, he knew that she wasn't quite as cavalier as she pretended. Cool, yes; fierce, yes. He'd played that fierceness into indignation at HQ's failure to provide her support. He'd played her soft,

participative management style, too – the wimp, he grinned – with promises to help her as she worked endless hours trying to make up for gaps in staffing over the long holiday week and then doing nothing, or doing things so patently wrong she'd stay up half the night redoing them while he played with his Tanzanian “friends.”

He'd likened himself to the Marlboro Man (ride 'em cowboy!) but the girls were too young to get the reference. Women used to say he looked like the Marlboro Man when women knew what that was; not any more since times had changed and cigarette advertising hadn't been allowed on the media for such a long time. He liked to brag about his top secret security clearance, too, but that didn't even impress most adults anymore, not to mention two girls who hadn't lived long enough to see many spy flicks and were more engaged by their favorite girl pop star's latest changes in career direction.

Harry had gone on line to find a similar masculine hero recent enough to appeal to a 14-year-old African girl but wasn't finding anything that suited a 68-year old American man. Vampires were popular, but he was already too far down that road with his age and the whiteness of his skin. He paid these girls plenty, at least 10,000 a night. Not exactly sucking their blood in his book.

Harry was not as fragile as his name, no light weight, not gossamer like the airy fairy stuff. “Goes-Hammer,” as he said when he introduced himself, swinging his fist down on the second syllable, where, he told startled newcomers to his life, they should always place the accent.

Harry's anecdote, the one he liked to tell the most – the one least likely to appeal to the girls although it held a lot of weight with consulting colleagues, all so good hearted – was

how he'd accidentally become head of a malaria ward in Guinea Bissau and saved hundreds of children's lives, and eventually closed it down by instituting public health measures in the town. When he was 24. When he was a believer. He'd given up his life-long dream of becoming a doctor – he just didn't have the grades – and gone for an MPH instead, which taught him enough medical mumbo jumbo to sustain his illusion. Then he'd joined the Peace Corps, where the local doctor grabbed at the opportunity for a position in Europe and left Harry, senior only by the color of his skin, in charge of the local hospital.

He still knew the dosages of all the most current malarial drugs. He'd defeated it once and he could do it again, by-the-Jesus. But no one took his credentials in that arena seriously anymore. After all, it had been forty years, and even third world countries had higher standards now than to hire a man like Harry. Fortune, it seemed, knocked only once on your door. In Harry's book, successful aging meant you recognized that unlike many human beings, you'd actually had your shot and weren't going to get another one. Given the realities of his age, experience, and education, he saw no reason not to succumb to the pleasures of expense-paid vacations on short gigs with consulting firms working in the mega-fucking bonanza of developing countries. He'd always blustered his way through, and he would do it again and go home with no one the wiser.

There was only one thing that bothered him. She'd been so small, the condom had slipped. These women couldn't follow you once you left if you got them pregnant (not likely), but they were 12 times as likely to carry AIDS as their brothers and sisters breaking rocks on the roadside or tending the family garden. She'd showed him the certificate from

her latest HIV test, but who couldn't fake certificates of any kind in Africa. He'd bought his yellow fever inoculation on the same open market when he'd traveled to SA a few years ago.

No doubt about it. He needed to get his hands on post-exposure prophylaxis – the morning after drug – and he needed it quick. He couldn't go to the Mission to ask – he'd gotten everything from free malarial drugs to cash for his dollars from them, as usual, claiming the brotherhood of the development cloth – but it would be awkward to ask for these, even if Mission-issue were the only drugs he could completely trust. He'd have to ask Massoud, the driver, to take him to a reputable pharmacy, one that wouldn't cost too much. He didn't want to pass anything on to Jean.

Harry nodded off again, and didn't waken when the local consultant stuck her head in the door to ask him what he wanted for lunch. Sophie tiptoed away from the door, signaling to her local colleagues to come have a look. "He's sleeping again," she said, placing her finger in front of her lips to shush them. "I think that call to Washington must have lasted much more than an hour." She shut the door firmly. "Order him *matoke*. It will make him have to fart a lot. *Mazungus* can't digest the fiber."

She'd argued with Beatrice, telling her "You take him in your car when we go to the field. Unless he can find a local supply of fresh meat, he's going to hit on me."

"What? I'm so ugly and old I don't have to worry?"

"It's not the ugly part," Sophie laughed. "But he definitely likes them under 30 – under 20 if he can get them – which makes you invisible to his appetites."

Beatrice grinned. "All I have to do is worry about who is going to make up for his work, be his secretary and travel agent, and find him Tusker *baridi sana*." Harry, like most of the

white men she'd worked with, limited their Swahili to ordering "cold beer" in insistent tones. "For Chissakes, Harry," Prudence had complained, "just say *tafadali*, will you? Ta-fa-da-lee. If you won't learn anything else, at least be able to say please and thank you. Every foreigner knows *asante*, for heaven's sake!"

Harry laughed at her. "Oh I know a few of those words" he'd leered. "I just don't like to use them in public."

Harry's current firm (now Prudence's former firm) was ABCDI – Advanced Business Consulting and Development Incorporated, some jumble of letters he could never remember the meaning of. One of the cynics in the home office liked to joke that the company's founder was too new to the US to actually have a firm grasp on the English alphabet, and hence had missed the "E" for economics, "F" for forecasting, "G" for greedy, and "H" for histrionic.

It was a typical beltway bandit servicing Washington's development czars with consulting packages so low in cost that they absolved both the consultants and their government masters of actually having to do any work. The Missions always argued they were "understaffed" – 55 in this local health office, he'd counted the boxes on the organogram – who were hard put to maintain their recreational schedules and busy lives surrounding forays to their children's events at the local International School and holiday visits to children being schooled in elite private secondary schools in the states.

Harry jerked awake again when Fatima stuck her head in the door and announced that lunch was ready. God! He'd been dreaming of Prudence, just the kind of woman he loved to be teamed up with but not the kind of woman he liked to dream about. She was so gullible,

so principled, so earnest, like his wife Jean. So capable, steady under pressure – she even held up to being brow beaten by HQ’s barely-out-of puberty female staff so well that he’d pledged to take up the cause of raising their per diems on her behalf. She could thank Harry for that much, anyhow.

In the dream, he and Prudence were stuck in a low end hotel their first night out into the field – he preferred to call it the “bush”, romanticizing the dirty, pathetic one-horse towns set in miles of sisal plantation, jungle swamp, and tea overgrowing endless hillsides. She wanted to spend their only free day, Sunday, reviewing their field notes, but his rule was to visit as many game parks as possible, stay in as expensive a hotel as his local per diem would allow, and hunt local partners. “We have plenty of time to look at our notes on the drive between field visit ‘sites’,” he’d complained. “Let’s not spoil our Sunday!”

When Harry had talked with Prudence, he held to the lexicon of proper scientific research to give her the sense that he was earnest about the work. He also pretended to bow to Prudence’s superior knowledge of these matters. That made it easy to delegate the work up and back to her. “Just point me where you want me to go and tell me what you want me to do” he’d told her soon after they’d met. “You’re the boss.”

“And you in the front seat of the Land Cruiser. Go figure, Harry,” she sighed. “That’s all very nice of you, but you *are* supposed to be a colleague here, with equal responsibility for the design and execution of this evaluation.”

“No problem, chief,” he said guilelessly. “I just don’t want to step on your toes.”

“Don’t worry about that, Harry. You already have,” she’d hissed. “As senior technical specialist, you’ve got to do some of the heavy lifting, too.”

In fact, he'd enjoyed Prudence more than most of the women he'd worked with. She had no interest in him – sometimes that could be a hindrance with local prostitutes – and her hard working no-nonsense demeanor and efforts at Swahili sure charmed the locals. So gullible, so earnest, so capable!

She was a dream partner because she actually cared about doing the work. Harry visualized himself as too senior to actually crank out reports – after all, that was why they hired all these young local coolies, wasn't it? For so long, before he'd retired, he'd been served by a plethora of eager secretaries and assistants – part of those overgrown staffs – who actually did the work. He'd never cared about the results of evaluations. They were going to end up doing the same thing anyhow, so why pretend?

The only thing Prudence hadn't waived on was moving to the high end hotel. Harry had managed to brow beat the manager into giving him a luxury suite with a bath tub – ideal for sexy interludes with young girls – but Prudence wouldn't budge, even when he tried to shame her in front of the client's staff. "I like the place we're at. You go if you want to, but I feel safer here."

Of course, he'd thought, it's a wonderful place if all you were interested in was working and the birds in the garden. The high end hotel not only had the swishy safari veneer, it had a great Cape Town style bar and the casino where he'd won beaucoup de cash at blackjack the last time he'd worked here. And an endless stream of beautiful young women more than willing to relieve him of some of the winnings. A place never looked more like heaven to Harry. His head lolled as he nodded off momentarily, dreaming of a steamy shower *a trois*.

I've got to get those morning after pills today, he realized, lurching up from his desk and shaking his head to clear it. He called the driver and they set off. "I need a really good pharmacy, Massoud. And then I'll take you somewhere and buy you a real lunch."

Sophie grinned. "What, no *matoke*? But I put in a double order for you."

"The staff can share it," he said magnanimously. "I need to see if I can get some blood pressure medicine, and I've got to go now so I can get back in time for our afternoon meetings." Sophie shrugged. "Enjoy," she said, turning back to her work.

The pharmacist was apologetic when Harry whispered his request. "I know of only one pharmacy in the city that carries it. Let me call and see if they have it. If they do, I'll reserve it for you and your driver can pick it up. But I have to warn you. It's fairly expensive, even in Africa. About \$500, and you have to take it for a month. It's normally given by prescription, but that can be waived for another \$200." Harry winced. "So much?" He really needed to get back to Black Jack.

"By the way, I'll have your Viagra refill ready for you when your driver returns for the ART. You really shouldn't take them together if you have a heart condition. Do you? I really shouldn't give this too you without knowing your heart history," the pharmacist said, thinking that the old man in front of him looked like a candidate for heart failure but wouldn't be in the country long if he was. Besides, they'd never trace the drug to him. "The possibility of heart attacks is one reason why Viagra is a prescription drug. A doctor needs to understand your medical history and make sure that Viagra won't cause a heart attack. If you feel any symptoms, stop taking it." Harry peeled off seven \$100 dollar bills.

He'd had a congenital heart problem fixed a few years previously. A valve replacement. The doc who did the surgery said everything worked perfectly now.

Massoud delivered Harry with minutes to spare for the client meeting then went downtown to pick up Harry's drugs. It hadn't gone badly, Harry thought, and the meeting with Washington went even better. They were replacing Prudence with another old health officer like him and a local public health type who would work on the expert details.

Massoud took Harry and his pharmaceuticals to the hotel at four. Plenty of time left for a nap. He dropped the morning after pill along with his Viagra, ordered some room service, and let the girls in when they'd rapped softly at his door. Twins, by god! Luck was in the air. He'd bed them down then take them over to the casino to sit on either side of him while he won at cards.

The girls let themselves out in the morning, still giggling. After giving Harry the second dose of Viagra in the glass of juice he'd ordered after the casino, they'd wiped their prints off everything, not that it made much difference here in the capital city. The woman hadn't said why she wanted them to do it, but she'd tipped them handsomely and told them it would reduce his libido so he didn't do them too much damage. He was sleeping soundly now. They let themselves down the elevator and stood talking quietly, waiting for the sun to rise before they walked to their parents' apartment.

Prudence checked her room one more time to be sure she hadn't left anything, then muscled her suitcase out the door and started down the hall, wishing the wheels didn't make so much noise. She was early, determined to get to the airport before morning traffic clogged the city.

Harry G

Harry woke at the sound of the wheels. His head jerked up at the sharp pain in his chest. He rolled out of bed and crept toward the bath room, his crouching walk slowed by the stiffness of his cock. He reached for water, swiping at it with his free hand. A shower would feel good, relax him so he could go back to sleep. Steam soon enveloped him and seeped out into the hallway. When Harry heard the sound of the passing footsteps he tried to call for help, but his legs collapsed underneath him. He could hear the phone on his computer ringing, the expected early morning Skype call from his wife.

As she passed Harry's room, Prudence noticed the steam curling out the shower vent window. Harry was groaning, quiet and muffled. That man certainly knew how to have a good time. He was going to have to do it without her to cover for him now. She shook her head and continued toward the elevator.