

Lela

Her skin is black matte. Her body is broad. Her teeth, opaque white. She keeps screaming, "Lela, Lela!"

I don't know her. Who is she?

Lela isn't me, is it?

Frenzied ocean waves rush toward me, smash into me, attempt to pick me up, carry me away. I feel hot and sticky. Where am I? My head aches, my eyes are blurry. I glance down at my tattered shorts, stained shirt, shoeless feet. Mosquitos fly around my head. My mouth is dry. "Oh please, I scream to the swarm of pests above me. Please, no ..."

It's always the same, the same nightmare.

I wake up dredged in sweat, clutching the down comforter on the queen-sized bed in our flat near Oxford. I tell myself I should get up. It's morning, light is coming through the windows, it's time to start the day and yet, I cannot move. My mouth is dry and tastes like salty fish. My teeth feel like they're glued together. Edward should be home soon. I have to get out of bed. He said he'd be home early this morning. He promised. I worry when he's away for days at a time, especially when he's in Africa, Mombasa, covering the political meetings about terrorist activity. It's a Catch-22 for young Africans, Edward tells me. As foreign governments warn tourists to stay away from Mombasa, jobs disappear leading young men into the arms of

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terrorist groups, sex gangs who offer them an income preying on their poverty, resentment towards the government.

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. It's almost 8 o'clock. I am still numb with fear and can't make the effort to drag my body out of my safe shelter. The dream is so real. Will it ever end?

I hear the key in the door. Edward! He's home early! I take a deep breath and leap out of bed rushing into his arms almost knocking him down as he opens the door as his overnight bag falls to the floor. Tears of relief fill my eyes.

"Elizabeth. Elizabeth, it isn't the same maddening dream again, is it?" he murmurs, combing back my long, blond hair with his slender fingers. I melt into his khaki shirt reeking of olive soap, masculinity. Edward lifts my face and I gaze into the indigo eyes that I know so well, his thick eyelashes almost unworldly. His thick wavy hair is black as ink and almost long enough to curl over his collar.

"I know," Edward says as he tucks me back into his embrace. "Why don't you come with me to Mombasa next week? You could shop the spice market, run the beaches, bask in the sun. It would do you a world of good to get away from this dreary foggy weather."

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"I don't know, I'm concerned about the terrorist activity, the unrest you've told me about. Especially since I'm so white, so muzungu, as Africans say. Look at my hair color! I'm always frantic even when you go there. Maybe that's why I'm having this frightful nightmare."

"I've never had a problem in Mombasa," Edward replies. "Of course, you'll be safe. You just have to stay out of the vulnerable areas. No one will bother you in broad daylight anyhow. Think on it," he urges. "You deserve time away from your studies. You haven't been away in ages. The news is always blown out of proportion anyway. Mombasa has a beautiful coastline, beaches. Tourist travel there from all over the world."

I hesitate, but only for a moment. It's been so long since I've been on holiday away from England with Edward, especially to a warm tropical climate. My law studies at Oxford have dictated my life the last five years. It would be heavenly to leave the bone-chilling fog, the hectic pace of academia. My dissertation is almost done. I could tie up loose ends when we return.

We arrive in Mombasa on a Wednesday morning after a nine-hour flight from London. The Moi International Airport in Mombasa seems worlds away from Heathrow Airport. Heavily armed soldiers in khaki colored uniforms patrol the hot, humid airport surveying the garrulous international travelers with critical, invasive eyes. I almost feel guilty when a soldier examines my passport, take fingerprints and cling to Edward's arm as we hurriedly move through the customs process.

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After settling in at our hotel in Mombasa Harbor, Edward kisses me goodbye and leaves to cover his meetings. I am weary from the long flight, but still anxious to explore the markets, the beaches. After unpacking and changing into running shorts, I wander through the colorful, contemporary hotel lobby and ask the concierge to call a taxi to take me to Nyali Beach, the one Edward suggested. Supposedly, it is one of the most beautiful beaches in Mombasa that's dotted with 5-star hotels and populated with international tourists.

"Is Nyali Beach safe to visit alone?" I ask the taxi driver as he graciously opens my door, as I'm still apprehensive.

"Sawa, sawa", the driver in jeans and a white starched shirt, replies and laughs. "No problem, no problem - lots of people, big hotels."

The hour long ride proves to be a raucous trip over dusty roads plagued with pot holes as we bump along in his Nissan Advan, a Nissan model foreign to me. Barefooted women plod along the treacherous roads balancing parcels of food and over-sized plastic water bottles on their heads. Herds of cows are being driven down the crowded streets by Kenyan herders in loose dirty robes. Donkeys pull wooden carts laden with vegetables and wares as their masters thwack the downtrodden animals with sharp branches to speed them along. My mind wants to compare British to African culture, but it isn't a fair equation to measure a constitutional monarch centuries old that once ruled Africa to a fifty-year three-party government that fought bitterly for its independence from Britain.

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I laugh out in excitement when I finally spy the endless stretch of white beach on the iconic Indian Ocean from my window. Edward was right, no need to fear this alluring friendly environment.

“You like? You like, Mees?” the driver exclaims in fragmented English.

“Yes, yes, of course I like,” I reply with a quiet smile. “Very much.”

The palm-studded beach and the warm sun flirt with me, invite me to join them. It doesn't take much coaxing.

I hurriedly abandon my sandals, stash them in my backpack and revel in the hot sand filtering through my toes; my bare feet welcoming the coddling warm blanket. Tourists are sporadically scattered on the beach as it is late in the afternoon. I breathe in deeply and inhale the ocean breeze as I adjust my socks, running shoes.

I race to the water's edge, laughing and taking deep breaths of salty air to clear my lungs of the stagnant English smog. The sun seems to be shining a spotlight directly on my face. I am high from the warmth of the sun, the ocean. Then I am sprinting down the beach – my destination: a sturdy pile of massive rocks almost a mile away. I want to run on the sand until I am out of

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breath, until I experience euphoria to celebrate this beautiful day, Edward's love, Africa. I am flying, my feet barely touching the sand. The ocean spray stings my face as the wind picks up.

In the distance, I spot a band of African boys gathered in a circle on the beach. Their colorful shorts and long, dark bodies are foreign to me but I'm here in Africa, their territory, their country. They are deep in conversation, then break out into laughter as their heads bob up and down. I smile.

They disband and seem to be walking in my direction. I slow my pace as the beach is empty of sun bathers on this stretch of sand. I feel apprehensive but remember what Edward said about broad daylight. They are laughing and pointing in my direction. I don't think they mean any harm, but I am still a bit leery and turn back in the direction of the hotels. I am jogging at first, then find myself running, then sprinting as I'm almost sure they're trailing me. Anxiety escalates in my head and my heart is pounding. Who are they? Why are they following me? Perspiration is pouring from my body. I turn to see them following my lead sprinting down the beach; their black, pencil-thin legs getting closer and closer.

"Hey Laa-dy, Hey Laa-dy" they shout out to me. "Come back, Come back. You want a boat ride? You want a hat for the hot sun? You want some mary-juana? Only one thousand shillings. Come back..."

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I am running out of breath but coax my body to move at an abnormal speed, begging my adrenalin to give me super powers, to outrun them but they're getting closer. I can hear the soft thumping of their feet in the sand behind me as they get closer and closer. The sand is suddenly spraying the back of my legs. I can't run faster. They are upon me, I see only their long legs and colorful shorts as I'm hurled to the sand.

"How about some sex, Lady? We got plenty of sex," the tallest boy spats at me. "Yeah - we got sex, we got plenty of sex," he repeats with a menacing glee in his eyes, as the others nudge each other and laugh louder and louder; their pink toenails getting closer and closer to my face.

I hear only the sound of boisterous waves as they rush toward me, smash into me, try to pick me up, carry me away with the tide. I am hot and sticky. Where am I? My head aches, my eyes are blurry. I look at my tattered shorts, my soiled shirt, shoeless feet. Mosquitos fly around my head. My mouth is dry. Oh please, I scream to the swarm of pests above me. Please, no ..."

"Lela! Lela!" the voice cries out. "Ondoka hapa! Ondoka hapa!" the voice screams to the loud scattering of running feet. I see only her opaque white teeth, her black matte skin, her broad body as she kneels down beside me.

"Lela, Lela," she cries.

The nightmare is over.