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Ardis' Hair

Ardis' hair was a phenomenon: hundreds of springy locks that poured from her skull. It bounced around her shoulders in gentle rhythm with the tilt of her thin brown neck. Cats adored it, children buried their faces in it, and from the moment we met I wondered how it would feel if I dared to reach my hands into its effusion. When she pinned it back, it nestled on the top of her head, as if ready to pounce. It was hair that belied the fact that hair is dead, hair that seemed to have a life force of its own.

Later I learned that the creation of these ordered locks was as complex as the woman herself. As it came from her head, Ardis' hair was a foamy, ethereal mass, looser and airier than a pure Afro. Unleashed, it was an aureole that she would wash and condition once a month, until it floated from her head in billows. On these days we would close the curtains to block out the sun. She would tie her hair down in sections, taking one part in hand and weaving it, one strand around the other until it was hung down in neat rows, like jewelry. For nine hours her hands moved and moved around each other, sectioning and twisting and tying back. When the day was done her locks were darker and tighter, with a slight sheen as if they had been oiled. Her tamed hair made her look younger and more vulnerable than her twenty-eight years. I had to gather it in my hands like strings of raindrops; I couldn't help it.

Where did it come from this hair, this person, youngest of eighteen by her father, seven by her mother, born on a river island, weaned on coconut water? Was it the confluence of all the cultures and histories in one blood, her African, Chinese, East Indian, Portuguese ancestors? Was it their languages and gestures that spoke through her body so finely? A new race jumped at me when I saw her, this small-jawed, mysterious face, these strong lips pink in the center swelling into an outline of warm brown.

She had her incredible hair, a sloping nose that widened as it approached her lips, large teeth, a high rounded forehead, tiny

close-set ears. This conglomeration of details created alchemy I never understood, though I stared at it asleep, awake, crying and laughing. I knew, really, she was just this skin over flesh over bones, this jutting here, this protrusion here. It was a beauty that clamped you on the shoulder when it met you, but not warmly. She shook people up. Men on the streets would glimpse her and react, demand an answer to their call: *Hey fine gyal, fine tings!* A Rasta man once threatened to *juk her up*, stab her, if she didn't return his greetings to Selassie I. She changed her route to work to avoid him. Otherwise, she was deaf to them.

Her beauty held intelligence within it, not just in the eyes, but all over, in the wrinkles, the dimples. She had a penetrating clarity that walked right out of her, that was, in truth, a bit scary. And there was a pulled back quality about her, a way of drawing people in and keeping them at bay that was often mistaken for arrogance. Once I met a red-headed Brit who, not knowing who I was, gossiped to me about her. "She's frozen," he told me, grimacing, "really so icy, like you could skate on her and she wouldn't crack."

It took me a while to realize that the boundary that for most people stops at their skin was, with Ardis, extended outward a few inches. This always made me feel like I wanted to touch her, and at the same time that something small and tiny and irreplaceable would break if I did. It was a torture you can only feel lucky for when it ends. I always had compassion for others around her because I think they must have felt as if they spent their days brushing the edge of a flower with just the shadows of their fingertips.

Cutting the Grass

We met Guyana from behind a railing. The training center was a former police compound, a large wooden building just down the street from the American embassy. For a week, our trainers would not let us leave. Things had happened to volunteers in the last group early on: muggings, sickness, wandering lost in the city. It was better to keep us playing Hearts and reading our paperbacks for a few days. And so we speculated about this new place, leaning from the balcony to hear the people's different-sounding English, and watching the packs of school children in their checkered uniforms running to school. Across the street was a small cemetery, its tombstones overgrown with vines, and beyond that the great Atlantic Ocean. The sea breezes swept through the building in the afternoons, and then the rain came and pounded the roof until we couldn't hear each other speak.

We were covered with angry red bumps. Some were faded mosquito bites. We had failed to tuck our nets in properly, or else we had rolled too close to the side and been bitten through the delicate mesh. A kind of tropical "bed bug" came after us too, emerging from the striped, foam mattress itself. The doctor brought creams, but we woke each morning with new crops of red rash. Pock-marked and mottled. Already our skin was changing.

In the large field behind the training center the grass was taller than the fence and the people who walked by it on the road. One morning some men arrived with long, curved, rusted knives. They swung the cutlasses sideways, hacking and hacking at the tall growth. Every day they cleared a small patch. Often it would only be one man and he would work for a time fully clothed, and then tie his shirt around his head. His muscles were thin and long under his skin and even from the railing you could see the sweat shining over his whole body.

It was already hotter than I had ever imagined it could be. Sit-

ting under the fans all day, I sweated. I sweated in the breeze and shade. I itched my red spots. But the men continued to come and chop, day after day, even after we had moved out of the center into our homes with Guyanese families, even after we had begun our training about community development, disease control, workshop facilitation. They came every day and worked a patch until the grass was chopped and flattened and lay drying out in the sun.

Then one day I could see them coming through the field and their bodies were not swimming in the grass. The grass was gone. Now, I thought, leaning over the side of the railing: this is when it happens, this is where we begin.

Wildcard

Pat was the tannest and, in her forties, one of the oldest volunteers among us. Indifferent to the risks of exposure, she insisted on biking at noon, her long, floral print dress billowing out as she pedaled to her job at the health clinic. I'm not going to keep these women waiting, she said the one time I met her on the road on a visit from the city, as if I were trying to hold her back. I stepped aside as she sped off, her muscular legs working hard against the soft dust, her wiry gray hair flying up against the brilliant blue sky. She was from New Hampshire and had been divorced; for months this was all I knew of her.

Pat had gotten a reputation during the first months of training for being erratic and temperamental. The specific gossip eluded me, but her group referred to her, always with a slight, fond shake of the head, as "Wildcard." "Wildcard" lived in a small pink cottage in Crabwood Creek, Berbice, a rural region separated from Georgetown by a massive river. "Wildcard" would not host new volunteers who came to the area, and refused to attend group meetings in the capital city. Sometimes she would see other volunteers in the market or on the ferry, the only other familiar face among thousands, and ignore them.

Our group of volunteers was so young that we kept calling our final induction ceremony "graduation." Most of us had finished college a few months before. And this felt right: youth was favored in this rigorous place. We healed quickly and well. We believed that time was spacious and forgiving. Guyana was just a warm-up for real life, an in-between period rife with adventure, and lean on responsibility.

But Pat shared none of our optimism or naivete. She was unlike Norman, a volunteer in his late sixties who had been a volunteer in three different countries, and seemed content to live on a small stipend and date young Indian women. Pat did not have a sheen of enthusiasm or satisfaction, just a determination for grinding hard work, which we mistook for drudgery. She was agitated, and unhappy, and she reminded us of what could happen when, or if, we took on the mantle of adulthood. When the rest of her group returned home, Pat decided

to stay on another year.

One night I went out with a group of other volunteers and ran into her on the street. *Katherine!* she greeted me with a strange smile, her eyes drooping. She was dressed in tight jeans and a black halter-top, her hair pulled back in a severe-looking clip. Wrapping her arm around my shoulders, I felt her body pressing into mine, her breath all rum. She seemed at once much younger and much older than me. I felt scared, though I couldn't say if my fear was for her, or for myself.

You have a girlfriend now, she whispered in her gravelly voice. I had started seeing Ardis, and the story was rapidly making its way through the volunteer gossip channels. Pat was leaning on me as we walked under the broken street lamps, from one bar to the next. *Great, so great, I think that's great*, she slurred, *We made snow angels... my girlfriend once...it was beautiful...we made snow angels...we made snow angels in the snow*. Her eyes were far away in our country, where there was such a thing as snow. She kept repeating snow angels, and mumbling other things I couldn't understand. She stumbled over a pothole, and I grabbed her waist to steady her. *You're sweet*, she said, looking at me again. Her eyes looked fogged and vacant, but I noticed for the first time a rough prettiness to her face. Her body was lithe and strong. She was not that old. At the next bar she swerved away to another table. That was the last time I ever saw her.

I heard the stories later from one of her friends. Pat had started drinking and coming into the city more often. She would flirt with other volunteers, twenty years younger, and one night she tried to hire a prostitute at the bar, a beautiful black girl who was confused by her advances. She would insist on leaving Georgetown at 3:00 AM, running out of bars to find a minibus to take her speeding three hours along the unlit road, and then wait two more hours in a deserted shelter for the ferry back to her town. This went on until a taxi driver raped her one night after drinking. She woke up naked from the waist down, wearing just a tank top, and could remember nothing else.

Pat left then, returned to the States and detox and counseling. The Peace Corps nurse grilled her friends: why didn't you tell us she was drinking so much? But we were all drinking so much; we didn't know that it was our place to stop her. No matter how old, she was one of us. There were so many tragedies in Guyana already. It was as if we couldn't stand knowing that we had brought another one into the country.

Nightspeed

About a month before I went to Guyana, yet another Peace Corps official form arrived in the mail. A forced confessional of sorts, it was a request to own up to any infractions of the law I had committed in the months since my extensive background check. I dutifully called the 1-800 number. A young man answered the phone and I told him only that I had been caught speeding in Georgia, that I had paid the ticket, that I was guilty as charged. Did they still want a speeding woman going down to teach the youth of South America?

Here is what I didn't tell him: how I had been driving south through billowing smoke, speeding past mysterious fires burning in the brush. How at 2:00 AM, my friend Carrie asleep in the passenger seat, I bore down on the gas pedal to blow through an empty town, the only lights glittering from what looked like abandoned mills. We were Northerners, arrogant kids going a hundred miles an hour through places we couldn't be bothered to see in the daylight.

The cop who pulled us over was strangely apologetic. He seemed about to cave in the face of my excuse that we had to be in Florida by the next morning. "Sorry, ma'am, but your speed came up on the radar." And so he delivered me the \$100 ticket, my first and only.

Carrie and I continued south, arriving in the town where my grandparents had moved when my grandfather retired from the law. They were glad to see us, but were not happy that I would be leaving soon for Guyana. My grandfather railed against my boyfriend for not "getting off his duff" and marrying me. My grandmother couldn't help wondering why I would want to go so far away in the first place.

In the shelter of their gated community, I was the errant granddaughter, not the great adventurer. Each day we spent with them entailed a defense of my choices. I felt the walls of convention

closing in. Carrie comforted me; we slept in the same bed and she held me. And though this is as far as it went—as far as we would let it go—my grandparents watched us and began to worry, later asking my mother about us. Could it be? Why?

Now I see it was a dress rehearsal. All of this before I went to Guyana and broke real laws. But the same, somehow, the same strange fires burning throughout the American South, the thin trunks of trees and glimmering lights through the branches. Months later, I would see black smoke rise from burning sugar cane and the wisps of the charred fibers floated in through my windows. This time it would land, leaving gray smudges on my arms and face; this time I would be marked by it.

When I called to admit my infraction, the man on the phone was incredulous. “You’re just calling about a speeding ticket?” he asked. And when I think of it now, I wonder at that girl’s naïve faith in confession. Did I believe this voice on the phone would absolve me? Could I have imagined that this call would protect me against further violations?

I was trying to be good, so good. I did not want to get into trouble.

Red Thread

In Miami, the staff gave us short bits of red thread to tie to our backpacks and duffel bags. The thread would make our bags identifiable, so that if anyone began walking away with them, we'd know. They would protect all that we had gathered on Army/Navy store shopping trips: canisters of bug spray, lightweight cotton T-shirts, rubber shoes that velcroed to our feet, a 700-page travel guide to South America which devoted just ten pages to our new home country. And all the marvelous gadgets—water purifiers, flashlights, digital compass/clocks—that would soon break, or rust, or be stolen. Our bags were piled in the airport van, all of those immaculate, expensive things crammed together down below, as we climbed in gingerly above.

The flight was at night, as all flights to Guyana are. I had a strange heat in my chest that I had never felt before. Someone suggested that it was heartburn, offered tablets. I spoke with another volunteer, a man from Virginia who had been seated next to me. He loved literature—he had just named his new chocolate Lab puppy Faulkner—and was a writer. He thought he might write a book about Guyana. Even if I just write down everything that happens for these two years, he explained, I'll have the skeleton of a novel. I nodded encouragingly, but I did not tell him that I was a writer, too.

Because it was night, we could not see our progress south over the Greater and Lesser Antilles, the famous strings of lush, volcanic islands, the Caribbean Ocean turquoise and gleaming. Our flight followed the well-worn tourist paths to the West Indies, and had we landed just north of Guyana—in Barbados, Trinidad, St. Lucia—people would have exited the plane wearing ridiculous straw hats and been driven to resorts with sandal-shaped pools, clearer even than the oceans. But we were headed to a country whose coastline was forever muddied by the churning of the four great rivers that fed its interior. Though we were arriving in the

middle of Tourist Board's "Visit Guyana Year!" there would be few visitors that year.

We began our descent. My heart turned hot again. The city lights were few; the runway lights fewer. And then, stepping out of hours of climate control, I moved into air like warm breath, intimate and mysterious as the shadows of palm trees dancing on the perimeter of the asphalt. There was nothing to interrupt the stars. We shuffled toward the bright, concrete room where hundreds of people sat waiting for the arrivals. They watched us from wooden bleachers, rows of the smaller children pressing their tiny bodies up against the smudged glass.

But before we piled into the bus and began our trip on the unlit road to Georgetown, we had to find our bags. Our new trainers began conferencing with the airport security. The bags were delayed. Lost? Then suddenly the guards dropped them in toppling piles before us, a mess of weatherproofed canvas.

Relief.

How could we know what wouldn't hold up? How could we imagine that all we really had were those little pieces of thread, so tiny and bright? I kept them tied on for the whole two years. They are on my bags still.