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## Wild Men Of Borneo

My father, seventy-nine, squats in a square of morning light. His hands, removing snails from a jade plant, look naked, shamed in the glare of the California sun. These hands never meant to live so long, their fingers pared down to nothing. Yet they move rapidly, plucking the snails with surgical steadiness. The family fortune: my father's hands.

"You're looking good, Pa," I say.

He doesn't look up from the cluster of deep green leaves, cushy as the pads of children's thumbs. "So you said. Last night."

He picked me up at the airport himself, crawling through Los Angeles at rush hour, locked behind tinted windows in the Buick's conditioned air. He was an hour early for my arrival. I, his son, didn't take my eyes off my watch during landing. The flight was already twenty minutes late as we started our descent: I was keeping the old man waiting. Even in retirement, he remains a surgeon. I imagined him in the airport's sordid men's room, scrubbing up, watching the clock.

"Guess the climate agrees with you," I say. Lame: the physician's son.

He looks up. "*I agree with it*," he tells me smoothly. "Why fight it?"

My father turns from me and raises his eyes to the piercingly clear sky. The light is like that in a hospital amphitheater, uncomplaisant and antiseptic. He smiles grimly, a man perfectly accustomed to prolonging life beyond the point of diminishing marginal returns.

My father and I have much in common. We lack for nothing but wives. We are both in positions to see to our own comforts. We admire, on strictly-timed visits, one another's amenities, for we are men who appreciate comfortable lives. Born to a tradition of tact, we delete references to the wives who abandoned us. My father managed to keep his for thirty-three years. I could hold onto mine for only five.

We speak of "my mother," of course. But somehow, in death, she has divided like an amoeba. "My mother" is another woman, not my father's wife. When she died of cancer of the colon, my father, saviour of lives, could not help but take it as a personal affront. Her death humiliated him. Now when he speaks of "your mother," his tones of sorrow are tokens of

affection for me. His wife is another case entirely, a strictly forbidden topic, a buried mistake.

My father told me a year or so ago of a predatory, gabby widow he met at a cocktail party. She plied him with questions about his past and prospects. "What about your late wife?" she said.

"My wife," my father told her, "has never been late."

Now I do not believe my father actually said this. He is a helplessly courteous man. But he *wanted* to say it, which is more to the point. I suspect him of secretly worshipping a recollection of a dim creature who was always on time. However, he does not speak of her, nor have her in mind, when he says to me, "your mother."

He knows I am about to leave him. He understands that I have come to California to tell him so. My last visit is not long enough past to justify this one. Besides, it is April, and my usual journeys are dictated by the fiscal year. My father knows I have come to take my leave.

He will not deign to inquire. He will not permit me to wedge the announcement easily into our conversation if he can help it. But he is waiting for me to hammer it home, I can tell.

He takes me out to lunch. We sit at a chrome and oak table, separated from Balboa Bay by a wall of amber glass. My father eats a club sandwich, impressing me still with his capable hands, his own teeth. He wears his gardening clothes — a yellow porkpie hat, plaid pants, a red cardigan. I admire the jauntiness he has acquired in retirement, a bold adaptation to this unnatural habitat. Perhaps he has cultivated brazen visibility as a means of survival. Now that he can no longer play golf, he seems to take pains to look as if he does.

"Your mother loved it here," he says.

"The Yacht Club?"

"California. She said it made her think the world wasn't so old, after all."

I smile.

"She couldn't get over the fruits and vegetables in winter. I thought avocados and kiwi fruit would start sprouting from my ears. And she'd bring the damndest-looking squash home from the Safeway . . ."

I see my opening. "You miss her, Pa," I say.

My father sets the mangled triangle of his sandwich firmly on the edge of his plate. When he looks at me, his light gray eyes are steely. I imagine this is the expression he used to buck up patients who must be made to accept bad news. "Your mother had a great deal of . . . zest," he says.

He is not about to brook a second opinion.

The fact is, my mother was frail. In her opinions, more than her person. She fell in love with my father the year she lost her own. I, by the time I was twelve, could convince her of anything, provided my father left me to my own devices. My mother, my father's wife, was a woman weakened by respect for men. She laid her fragile doubts to rest in a warm cradle of affection and regard, and bridled her own enthusiasms. My father and I could come and go as we pleased. She always waited for us.

Sometimes my mother cried in the afternoons. But she always swore she didn't. The days must have been long for her. Waiting. Some days I would come home late from school to find her sitting in the darkened living room, on the edge of the piano bench, at the bass end of the keyboard. There would be no sheet music in sight, and my mother never could play from memory. I would switch on the old brass floor lamp, and the silk shade would cast a false golden glow over her face, her auburn hair, her narrow shoulders.

"You're home," she'd say, as if I'd done something miraculous. The lids of her eyes would be rosy and swollen.

At a certain age, I was not too cautious to ask if she'd been crying. She always denied it with a girlish laugh. In time, perhaps to forestall my indelicate question, she moved from the piano bench to the crewel-work wingback chair beside the fireplace. She would hold a book in her lap, and listen for the door to open so she could switch on a lamp before I reached the room.

"Have you been crying, Mom?"

"A sad book, lovey. I'm a silly old sob-sister." I permitted her laugh to convince me. She became an admirer of Anne Morrow Lindbergh and other brave lady-writers who had outlived their children.

I never told my father that his wife, my mother, wept behind his back. I expected him to know it, just as she expected me to guard her secret. My father was a brilliant doctor, with a gift for diagnostics. At the very least, he should have seen the days were bound to be long for her.

Two and a half years ago, at my mother's burial, I did not look at her husband to see if he cried when her cushioned, polished casket was cradled in the sandy California ground. I was afraid for a moment I might hate him either way, despise his strength or his weakness. I edged closer to him and kept my eyes on my ex-wife, Linda, who stood with the minor mourners on the opposite side of the grave. Linda and my mother had been very fond of each other. I distracted myself from my father by wondering if my wife had ever been reduced to tears by the unbearable weight of a long afternoon.

Although they had courted me for several years, I accepted a position with the World Bank only after my father and I had lost our wives. I could not leave my whereabouts to chance, knowing women waited for me. Linda might have come along wherever I went, of course, and we had no children. But each time I considered the prospect of a foreign post, there arose a pathetic picture of my wife languishing in a hammock in Karachi or Calcutta with the sun still high in the sky. I heard her soft, desperate voice struggling to confide in some Swahili-speaking houseboy, or haggling over a piece of stringy meat at a stall in the Casbah. I toyed with such scraps of imagination until I froze fast to them, like a child's tongue stuck to a metal fencepost in winter. I tore myself away from exotic ambitions, claimed the World Bank was a poor risk: some parts of the world are not fit to be seen by a man with dependants.

I neglected, however, to extrapolate my theories to Maclean, Virginia. I hastened to my office at the Brookings Institution each morning and never paused to ask how my wife spent her days. She mistook my conscientiousness for passion, my confidence for disregard. When she left me, I found her, for the first time, stunning. Not long ago she married a linguist from Georgetown and moved to Peru without batting an eye. Like my mother, Linda was sadly underestimated.

When the World Bank tendered what I felt would be its final offer, I discussed it with my father. I could not calculate the precise effect my whereabouts might have on him.

"They could send me to some pretty out-of-the-way places," I said.

"You're young," he told me, as if that answered everything.

"For two- or three-year hitches," I said.

"It's your decision, son."

"But what about you?"

He gazed past my shoulder toward an oil portrait of my mother, the oddly incongruous gift his colleagues had commissioned to mark his retirement from the staff of Sloan-Kettering. "I always wanted to see Borneo when I was a boy," he said. "Borneo. Imagine."

"Why Borneo?"

" 'The Wild Men of Borneo.' In those days, all the circuses and carnivals had them." He seemed to study me speculatively for a moment, taking my measure. "Before your time," he said.

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. "I guess that settles it, then," I said foolishly.

My father nodded, his expression solemn and innocent, sealing a bargain without logic. The lack of irony in his eyes aged him in mine.

That was two years ago. I have yet to see Borneo, but I have traveled to



South America, Africa, the Far East. I have explored the economic ruins of world powers, the fiscal jungles of developing nations. I have kept a sharp eye on deficits, gross national products, and per capita incomes while governments toppled. At the World Bank, as at Brookings, I have earned a reputation as a "troubleshooter," a cool correspondent of currency wars. I, however, prefer to regard myself as merely a chip off the old block — a man with a gift for diagnostics.

Now I am to be rewarded for the slim margin of error in my second guesses: Tokyo. The assignment is something of a plum. I have been promised a host of benefits: administrative autonomy, car with driver, the opportunity to sway world markets. My flight departs from Dulles one week from tomorrow. I have come to take leave of my father. He knows, without being told. He waits through the long afternoon.

"What time is your plane on Sunday?" It is Friday.

"Early. Seven-thirty."

He nods. "No traffic problems, then."

"Why don't I just get a limousine?"

I am dismissed with a gesture, a wave of his still-competent hand. "How about some Mexican food tonight?" he says. "There's this place Nixon loved in San Juan Capistrano . . ."

I give the old man credit: he has managed to work the evils of politics and the perils of foreign travel into a single proposition. He is a master of the suggestive remark.

"Sure. I could go for some chiles rellenos."

"And margaritas. We'll make a night of it."

He is waiting.

"Pa —"

"So, where's it going to be?"

"The place in San Juan Capistrano sounds fine," I say.

His laugh is brutally abbreviated, like the bark of a dog with a choke-chain clutching its throat. I remember him telling me once, long ago, "The first incision's always the hardest to make . . . but it shouldn't be. That's rarely the one a patient dies from."

"Tokyo, Pa. Next week."

"For how long?"

My fingers curl, tighten, as if I am holding a scalpel. I relax them, force my own hand to hold firm. "For a couple of years, anyway."

"Tokyo . . . sounds like you're moving up pretty fast, boy."

I shrug. It wouldn't do, now, to tell him about the living allowance, influence on exchange rates, a waiting driver, the balance of trade.

"Tokyo." He shakes his head. "Not exactly Borneo, is it?"

The restaurant is crowded. Even with a reservation, we have to wait twenty minutes for a table. My father and I, two independent men, stand side by side at the blue and white tiled bar, drinking margaritas. A swag of plastic peppers festoons a mirrored arch, the bartender's proscenium. Absurdly young and beautiful, he performs with the staccato precision of a picador among the lustrous glasses and whirring chrome machines.

The old man plays host, drawing me out about world gold prices, the Federal Reserve. He has put on a navy blue blazer, a vague nautical insignia on its breast pocket. His handkerchief is paisley silk. Coarse salt glimmers at the corners of his mouth.

I catch myself stumbling, losing the strength of my convictions under my father's merciless charm. Then there is the inevitable lull. He lets me off the hook.

"Sorry about the wait, son."

"Friday nights," I say.

"Funny . . . time always seems so much longer when you're waiting for something." He sets his thick-lipped greenish glass on the bar and spreads his hands on either side of it. He stares in mild astonishment at how they betray him. "I'm beginning to understand what your mother . . . what Claire . . . meant."

Speechless, I touch my father's sleeve.

"She'd use that expression, 'time hangs heavy on your hands.' I never understood her."

Beneath my fingers, my father's bent elbow twitches, once, as if he is trying to shake me off. "She was always waiting for something, your mother."

"We all are, Pa."

"I suppose so."

In the next room, a mariachi band is playing "Vaya con Dios."

"Don't get me wrong," my father says, "but I wish sometimes you'd been a girl."

Indescribable pain fills my chest, suffocating me. My father observes, making a swift, sure diagnosis.

"It just might be easier, son."

"How?"

"If you were a daughter, maybe I could ask you not to go."

"What if I went anyway?"

My father looks away, through the archway into the crowded, noisy dining room. He tilts his head to one side, seems to be listening to the music, inhaling the overspiced air. There is a twisted smile on his salty lips.

"Tonight I'd dance with you," he says.

A waitress in an embroidered blouse approaches us. There is a string of veined turquoise beads around her neck. She has the coarse-grained, unfinished look of a primitive madonna. "Your table is ready, Sir." She addresses me, not my father.

My old man lifts his glass. "To Tokyo," he says.

"To Borneo," I correct him, gently touching my glass to his.

He takes my arm and allows me to lead him into the next room.