

The sisters screamed and ran past the guard. The guard stopped and he lifted his gun and he fired. The lead dog somersaulted over in the sand. His ear was shot off and a piece of his head too, I think. The pack of dogs skidded and stopped and they tore into the fallen dog. They were biting out chunks of the neck-flesh while the back legs were still thrashing and twitching. I screamed. The guard was shaking.

From out of the jungle, six men came running. They wore tracksuit trousers, all torn, and vests and running shoes, gold chains. They moved quickly up on us. They ignored the dogs. One was holding a bow, holding it drawn. The others were waving their machetes, daring the guard to shoot. They came right up to us.

There was a leader. He had a wound in his neck. It was rotting — I could smell it. I knew he was going to die soon. Another of the men wore a wire necklace and it was strung with dried brown things that looked like mushrooms. When he saw Kindness, this man pointed at her, then he made circles on his nipples with his fingers and he grinned. I am trying to report this as matter-of-factly as I know how.

The guard said, 'Keep walking, mister and missus.'

But the man with the neck wound — the leader —said, 'No, you stop.'

'I will shoot,' the guard said.

But the man said, 'Maybe you will get one of us, maybe two.'

The man with the bow was aiming at the guard's neck, and he said, 'Maybe you get none of us. Maybe you should of shoot us when we was far away.'

The guard stopped walking backwards, and we stopped too. Little Bee and Kindness went round behind us. They put me and my husband between themselves and the hunters.

The hunters were passing round a bottle of something I thought was wine. They were taking turns to drink. The man with the bow and arrows was getting an erection. I could see it under his tracksuit trousers. But his expression didn't change and his eyes never moved from our guard's neck. He was wearing a black bandanna. The bandanna said EMPORIO ARMANI. I looked at Andrew. I tried to speak calmly, but the words were crushed in my throat.

'Andrew,' I said. 'Please give them anything they want.'

Andrew looked at the man with the neck wound and he said, 'What do you want?'

The hunters looked at each other. The man with the neck wound stepped up to me. His eyes flickered, rolled up inside his head, then snapped back down and stared madly at me, the pupils tiny and the irises bullet-hard and gleaming like copper.

I tried to stop my legs from shaking.

`Please,' I said. 'If you will let us take the girls with us, then we will do whatever you want. Let us all go back to the compound, please, and we will give you anything. Money, medicine, anything.'

The killer made a high, shrill yelp and a shiver shook his whole body. He giggled, and a dribble of blood escaped through his neat white teeth to splash down onto the dirty green nylon of his tracksuit top.

`You think I care bout that stuff?' he said. 'You don't see this hole in my neck? I am dead in two days. You think I care bout money and medicine?'

`So what do you want?' Andrew said.

The killer moved his machete from his right hand to his left. He raised his right hand with the middle finger extended. He held it, shaking, one inch from Andrew's face and he said, 'White man been giving me this finger all my life. Today you can give it me to keep. Now cut off your middle finger, mister, and give it me.'

Andrew flinched and he shook his head and he curled his hands into balls. He folded the thumbs over the fingers. The killer took his machete by the blade and he held the handle out to my husband.

`Do it,' he said. 'Chop chop. Give me your finger and I will give you the girls.'

A long pause.

`What if I don't?'

`Then you are free to go. But first you will hear the noises these children make dying. You ever hear a girl dying slow?'

`No.'

The killer closed his eyes and shook his head, unhurriedly.

`It is nasty music,' he said. 'You will not forget. Maybe one day you will wake up in Kingston-upon-Thames and you will understand you lost more than your finger.'

Little Bee was crying now. Kindness held her hand. `Do not be afraid,' she said. `If they kill us today we will eat bread tonight with Jesus.'

The killer snapped open his eyes and he stared at Andrew and he said, 'Please, mister. I am not a savage. I do not want to kill these girls.'

Andrew reached out his hand and he took the killer's machete. There was blood on the handle, the guard's blood. Andrew looked across at me. I stepped over to him and I put my hand on his chest, gently. I was crying.

`Oh, Andrew. I think you have to do it.'

`I can't.'

`It's just a finger.'

`We didn't do anything wrong. We were just walking down the beach.'

‘Just a finger, Andrew, and then we'll walk back again.’

Andrew sank to his knees in the sand. He said, 'I can't believe this is happening.' He looked at the machete blade and he scraped it on the sand to clean it. He put his left hand on the sand, palm up, and he folded all the fingers except the middle one. Then he held up the machete in his right hand, but he didn't bring it down. He said, 'How do we know he won't kill the girls anyway, Sarah, after I've done it?'

‘You'll know you did what you could.’

‘I could get Aids from this blade. I could die.’

‘I'll be with you. I'm so proud of you.’

It was quiet on the beach. Seabirds hung low in the hot blue sky, without flapping their wings, upheld on the sea breeze. The rhythm of the surf was unchanged, although the interval between one wave and the next seemed infinite. I watched with the girls and the men and the bloodied dogs to see what my husband would do, and it seemed in that moment that we were all the same, just creatures in nature hanging without any great effort upon the vast warm wind of events that were greater than us.

Andrew screamed, then, and he chopped down with the machete. The blade made a whipping sound in the hot air. Then it sliced down into the sand. It was really quite far from his hand.

I won't do it,' he said. 'This is just fuckin' bullshit. I don't believe he'll let the girls go. Look at him. He's just going to kill them whatever.'

Andrew stood, and he left the machete in the sand. I looked at him, and that is when I stopped feeling. I realised I was no longer scared. And I wasn't angry with Andrew. When I looked at him I hardly saw a man any more. I thought we would all be killed now, and it worried me much less than I would have expected. It troubled me that we had never got around to building the glasshouse at the end of our garden. A sensible thought occurred to me: *How lucky I am to have two healthy parents who will take good care of Charlie.*

The killer sighed and he shrugged and he said, ‘Okay, Mister made his choice. Now, Mister, run back home to England. You can tell them you came to Africa and you met a real savage.’

When the killer turned away, I dropped to my knees. I looked straight at Little Bee. She saw what the killer did not see. She saw the white woman put her own left hand down on the hard sand, and she saw her pick up the machete, and she saw her chop off her middle finger with one simple chop, like a girl topping a carrot, neatly, on a quiet Surrey Saturday, between gymkhana and lunch. She saw her drop the machete and rock back on her heels, holding her hand. I suppose the white woman looked just amazed.

‘Oh,’ I think I said. ‘Oh, oh, oh.’

The killer span round and he saw me with the blood welling through my closed fist.