

Fingers and Toes

By Alexander Pitcher

1.

The room was dark except for an oil lamp that combated the encroaching shadows. Bullet casings and powder lay on the desk, and with the precision only earned by long hours of repetition, the girl picked up a casing, poured powder into it, fit the slug in the casing, checked the alignment, and set it upright with the other bullets.

A figure opened the door and the orange light that flooded in startled the girl. Her eyes adjusted, but the figure still stood like a dark monolith before her. The figure crouched down over the desk to inspect the bullets, and the figure's face entered the glow of the lamp. He huffed, and perspiration glittered on his face. The girl stared at his chin and the swollen rolls of fat that ballooned around his neck. His arms and thighs had the staunch nature of roman columns, and he heaved them from place to place with great exertion that bordered on stifled pain. The gold rimmed glasses pinched at his thinning gray sideburns.

"You see these glasses, my dear?" He'd ask the girl many nights in his living room, surrounded by family.

She'd nod because she, indeed, could see his glasses.

"Your great grandfather and three of his companions lost their lives for this gold."

She'd implore him to elaborate, but her grandfather refused.

He nodded to himself, scooped the bullets into a leather sack and let the girl out. Her grandfather's mansion was adorned with paintings of ancestors long dead. A great general, a judge with photographic memory, an air balloon pilot: all rendered in flaking oil.

He told her to wait by the front door as he walked down to a Jeep, around which her parents stood and talked quietly to themselves. She strained her ears to hear the adults's altercation.

"Dad, I don't like this."

"She loves the safari,"

"It's too dangerous."

Her grandfather frowned. "Gustav will look after her when we venture off the main road."

Gustav was the groundskeeper. He was five foot three and wasn't allowed back into his own country.

"That doesn't make me feel better."

No one spoke for a moment, and the girl's attention was engulfed by the heat waves that danced over the marble pathway in the garden about twenty feet to her right.

The parents called her over. She obediently walked to them.

"Do you want to go hunting with Grandpa today?" Her mother asked.

The girl had merely accepted that that was the day's plan. She hadn't given her own opinion much time to marinate.

The girl said nothing.

Her grandpa scratched his chin and ran his pinky across what was once a well defined jawline.

She knew what this meant, and it tipped the balance.

"I want to go, Mama."

"Fine."

They hoisted the girl into the Jeep and the Grandfather took the wheel. Gustav finally arrived in a jeep of his own. A sash of bullets hugged his leather vest. The parents huddled around the girl's side of the Jeep.

"Be careful," the Father said.

"I love you," the Mother said.

"I will. Bye bye. Love!" the girl responded.

The gravel kicked up when the wheels started turning and the Jeeps sped away.

2.

They stopped in town for gas. The town was a pitiful thing, the girl thought. There was a diner with rain stained windows and slatted wood, the crevices of which were smothered with cobwebs. A cracked concrete road connected the diner with the two other buildings of the town: a greasy gas station and a greasier motel. Heat and mosquitos littered the air.

Gustav filled the tanks. The Grandpa dozed. The girl watched Gustav work. She avoided his eyes and focused on the flower tattoos on his arms. The stems curved around his skin, and his hairs stuck out of the petals like fly legs. She felt his gaze shift towards her and she quickly looked away.

She shook her grandpa's arm. His eyelids opened slowly, and he grunted.

"You promised me ice cream," she said.

"Hm? Oh yes. I suppose I did," he responded.

Gustav lifted his head. "Sir, I can run and get something for her."

"No. No. I'll get it." Her father opened the door and slid out of the car. For the girl, it evoked the image of a teddy bear if it was armored like a crab.

She called after her Grandpa, “I want chocolate and peanuts.”

“Done,” the Grandpa said. He turned and entered the station.

The girl stuck her head out of the window and her shadow on the ground. Strands of her hair flipped around. She stared at her silhouette and wondered if she could see it move as the sun careered through the sky. Gustav finished up the tanks, screwed the caps back on and sat in his jeep.

The Girl thought she could see her shadow slowly pass over a crack on the ground, but she wasn't sure. The grandpa reappeared with an ice cream wrapped in paper. He handed it to her.

“One drumstick for the lady,” he said. She pulled open the lid and marveled at the chocolate swirls and little peanut crumbs on the vanilla cream. She tore the paper around the cone.

3.

On the drive to the safari, the girl counted 187 potholes on the road, twelve flamingos in the surrounding fields, and three cramps in her legs. She crumpled, flattened and refolded the ice cream wrapping, and the chocolate residue melted and seeped out of the paper. Her fingers were sticky and it felt too gross to lick them clean.

They reached a small dirt pathway--hidden from view and shrouded in shadow. The grandfather killed the ignition and laboriously slipped out of the Jeep again. He lifted his gun out of the back. Gustav followed suit. The girl hopped out. She took off her shoes and felt the mud push itself up and around her toes.

“Stay near us, Isabella,” her Grandfather said.

The three set off into the brush. Gustav led the way, followed by Isabella, and her Grandfather trailed behind them.

However, it wasn't long before the girl would circle back and forth ahead and behind the adults. She picked at flowers and watched beetles do their thing. Whenever she did, the Grandfather stopped walking and called for Gustav to do the same. They watched her with slight, bemused smiles but clenched their guns tightly.

They set up camp underneath a tree. They stayed put until the tree's shadow abandoned them, so they followed it until the sun settled near the horizon.

Gustav mumbled something the girl didn't understand. She felt a thud in the earth. She strained her eyes. A family of elephants passed out from the trees and entered the open plane. The orange sunlight hit their foreheads from behind, so their skin appeared to be aflame. The girl's heart swelled and pounded, and she imagined herself running alongside the beasts on all fours and swinging her snout about here and there. Her grandfather levied his gun. He aimed at one of the larger ones.

He paused.

"Isabella, do you want a shot?"

Isabella wasn't sure, but accepted nonetheless. He handed her the gun. It was heavy and the wood felt soft against her hands. She strained to lift it up.

"Aim for that big one over there," the Grandfather said.

She peered down the ironsight and lined up the black cross with the elephant's dark eye.

"When you're ready," her Grandfather continued, "pull the hammer back."

She used the fleshy part of her thumb to hook around the hammer and pulled it back like she was told.

“Take three breaths and shoot in between your heartbeats.”

She inhaled. She felt her blood slow down. She exhaled. The elephant took a step. She inhaled and panned the gun to keep the eye in her sights. She exhaled again. The metal felt damp to the touch. She was suddenly aware of the burnt smell coming off of the chamber. She didn't want to inhale again but she did. She exhaled. She could feel her heart complete its cycle. The elephant stood still. Her finger twitched on the trigger--

“I can't,” she said. She lowered the gun. All she could see was the horrid flower as her bullet splashed into the elephant's eye and the shudder of the elephant's muscles as it fell.

She felt a sob rise up through her chest. She didn't want to cry in front of Gustav, but she wasn't sure if she could help it.

“I'm sorry,” she continued. “Please don't be mad.”

Her Grandfather took the gun back.

He said, “It's okay. It's okay.”

She cried.

“Would you like me to hit it for you?” Her Grandfather asked.

She shook her head.

“Do you want to go back?”

She nodded.

“Done. Gustav?”

“Yes, sir,” the grounds keeper said. He stood up.

“Go with Gustav,” her Grandfather said.

She didn't move. “Are you coming with us?”

“Soon.” He said. He smiled and added, “Go on.”

The girl stood up and followed Gustav away. They followed the narrow path. The girl stared at the floor and suddenly felt so childish. She hated everything. She hated the Jeeps, Gustav, her parents, the mosquitos, the bullets and herself. She hated being the center of the day. She looked at her toes. The mud had caked over them and dried. It itched. She reached down and picked at it. The mud flaked off and some of it got stuck in her fingers. She wanted to go back to her Grandfather and show him that she could do it. She wanted to curl up in a ball. She wanted to run. She wanted her Mother to braid her hair again.

She heard the echo of a dull blast.

Gustav paused in his tracks.

She looked up at him. He stared down the path behind them. He ran the way they came. She ran with him.

They found her Grandfather on the ground. His face was bloody and his gun was split apart and the barrel steamed.

It wasn't until much later that she was told a bullet jammed and backfired into her Grandfather.

The Girl, now a Woman, had trouble falling asleep that night.