

KIM BRIDGFORD

Crazy People

When I think about my crazy family, sometimes even I can't believe it: shy Uncle Ross with his room in Grandma's house, his face smooth and sensitive to light; Aunt Mary with all her causes, like flags drooping out of her purse; and my mother who would just as soon pull on her fish-net stockings and tap-dance for a visitor as bake a cake.

I suppose that's why what happened to me did. I believed that eccentricities made people interesting, made daily life full of *carpe diem*. That was my father's motto—take a little dose of *carpe diem*—even as he tried all the drink recipes from his bartender's book and played solitaire to the tunes of Cole Porter. For a while he was stuck on martinis and whether they should be served with onions, pickles, or small hors-d'oeuvres.

But this is my story, the one that belongs to me, the way none of my earlier life did. I was always swept away by somebody, holding on to the coattails of another family member, the sane one sweeping up the mess of bird droppings or soap from bubbles blown in the house. My father would say, now that I'm back and safe and his daughter again, that all I did was change one coattail for another, but at least my life was different from that of anyone else in my family.

I joined a cult.

I was away at college and had made the mistake of asking for a single room, which, for some strange reason, I received even as a freshman. The privacy was great for studying, but I found

myself gripped by such an overwhelming loneliness that I knocked at people's doors at all hours, scribbling frantic notes on their memo boards about friendship.

One day someone knocked back, a severe girl, like someone out of a Dutch painting, someone whose look said that things were pretty serious and that there wasn't much anybody could do about it.

"Hello," she said, her face as impassive as stone. "I'm Ingrid."

I realized I had a copy of *The Canterbury Tales* in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. I was an English major, which my father said was the only civilized thing to be, unless you had a gift for theatre.

I put my book and coffee down, extending my hand, the way people did in all the old movies my parents loved. "Madeline," I said, staring in dismay as Ingrid refused to take my hand.

But she seemed unmoved by what had happened, and her mood seemed to shift. "Let's get coffee," she said, smiling, "and talk about Shamba."

"All right," I said, grabbing my coat. I didn't know if Shamba was a band, an exotic drink, or a new dance step, but I was ready.

We went to a place that was known as much for people throwing up in its bathrooms on Saturday nights as for its fantastic homemade desserts and coffee during the week. How such things could co-exist with such simple acceptance on everyone's part struck me as one of those facts about college life, like having a roommate who has sex with her boyfriend on the bunk bed over yours.

Ingrid ordered a milk and an oatmeal cookie and looked with mild amusement upon my double latte and chocolate fudge brownie cake. "So," she said, leaning forward, "what do you know about Shamba?"

"Absolutely nothing," I said, having been taught by my parents that the best way to surprise people was to be truthful when you knew nothing about a subject.

Ingrid pulled a flyer out of her bag. It was decorated with birds along its border, and in the middle sat an old man with a flowing white beard. He was wearing faded grey robes and was either sitting on a throne or leaning against part of a tree.

"That," she said, tapping respectfully at the edge of the picture, "is Shamba, the one who will save us all."

"From what?" I said as the waitress brought our desserts and coffee. I made a show of taking a big bite from my cake.

She didn't miss a beat. "From whatever it is that distresses us. Sadness. Pain." She looked me straight in the eye. "Loneliness."

My cake was suddenly dry in my mouth. How I hated those nights alone in my room, when my blankets felt hot and my heart felt cold. How I missed even my family with their craziness that had swallowed me up. My father finally had to say, "Be brave, girl. You can't be calling home every two seconds. Things will get better; you'll see."

They hadn't yet. So in response to Ingrid's comment, I couldn't keep myself from asking, "How does he do that?"

She smiled, pushing back her reddish-blond hair. "He gives you something to do, a Higher Purpose." She bit into her cookie and took a sip of milk. "He saved my life."

"What happened?" The faint sounds of Billie Holiday wafted in the distance.

"I was a slut," she said, and, when she saw my look of disbelief, she waved her hand. "Shamba teaches you to face your past and present and shape a new future. I slept around in high school and hated every minute." She smiled. "Well, not every minute," and I laughed, "but enough so that I wanted to kill myself, enough so that I wanted to die."

"And now?"

"I want to live," she said, and she was shining. "Each new day is a blessing from Shamba. Each day is a miracle."

"What can I do?"

"Come to a meeting and find out," she said, and I said I would.

We took a bus to the other side of town, and we were met by a man, Robert, who drove around in so many circles I couldn't remember the way. Finally we pulled up to a farmhouse that looked deserted. Yet things were bustling inside, with people who looked remarkably like Ingrid singing and cooking and stuffing envelopes.

"Hello, Ingrid," said everyone in the room at once. "Blessings to Shamba's daughter."

"And blessings to you all," she said. She suddenly put her arm through mine. "This is Madeline."

"Hello, Madeline," everyone said.

“Hello.” I waved so that everyone laughed.

“She would like to find out about Shamba,” Ingrid said, guiding me across the common room to a table where people were busily filling boxes.

“She might as well start here,” said a young man who had a pleasant face. Yet it was severe at the same time, as if a child had drawn a face, then put in two sticks for eyebrows.

“Look.” I put out my two hands. “I don’t know much about Shamba yet, so I’d like to know what I’m getting into first.”

“Fair enough,” said the young man. “I’m David, by the way. You don’t really have to do anything. I’m just all thumbs with the tape. That’s all I was asking—to help me tape the boxes shut.”

“Fair enough,” I said, and he laughed. Soon it was easier for me to do the labels than to hand the boxes back to David, and then Susan—she was sitting across from me—handed me the contents.

“Eventually it’s just easier to do the whole box,” she said. I started to see what she meant. Everyone seemed very interested in everything I had to say, and I hadn’t had such a nice time in a while. By the end of the evening I had put together fifty informational packages on Shamba.

It all seemed harmless enough. I went to my classes, did my homework, and a couple of nights a week helped do some things out at the Shamba House. They were all very friendly: some were students, some lived in the town, and some lived right in the Shamba House itself. Sometimes they asked me to construct more packages, other times cook, other times just mingle with the group, and they seemed to like me; they seemed to like what they saw.

One weekend they asked if I wouldn’t mind staying at the Shamba House; it was so far to go from one side of town to the other, when you thought about it, and Shamba himself was coming—did I know what that meant? Did I know what an honour it was?

I was excited. He seemed to have brought happiness to all of these people, so much that we started calling each other Brother and Sister. We couldn’t help it.

I had agreed. It was Saturday night, and I was cooking soup with Ingrid; we always ate light. As I chopped up some carrots on the cutting board I said, “I can’t wait to ask him some questions.”

“What?” she said, turning from the sink. “What did you say?”
 “I can’t wait to ask him some questions.”

She slapped me hard across the face and then, just as suddenly, she was kissing the mark, softly as a mother. It was wonderful.

She pulled back and looked me in the eye, as if the moment had never happened. “Nobody ever asks Shamba questions, Sister. You must know that by now.”

It was a truth I never forgot.

When Shamba arrived, the farmhouse was shining, and everyone gave him a slight bow. You couldn’t help it, when he touched your forehead in that way he had, hot and hard at the same time. He had eyes that pierced you, that made you look away.

Still, when I stole glances now and again before the ceremony, Shamba struck me as an old man. He scratched at his face sometimes; he dozed once or twice in his chair; he teased all the brothers and sisters like grandchildren.

Finally, he went to the podium to speak. His robes were grey, as in the photo; to the side was the ceremonial chair I recognized from the leaflets, made, it seemed, from a tree that had been felled from a stroke of lightning. The tree had been split, right in two, but Shamba had been saved, Shamba the worker of miracles. In preparation for the service, the brothers and sisters formed a circle at his feet and began passing a large bowl of steaming liquid.

“What is this?” I whispered to Ingrid, whose eyes were on the Shamba.

“Sshh,” she said.

“What is this?” I repeated.

“It’s all right.” She touched my face. “Trust me, Sister.”

So I drank and passed the bowl to David.

“Welcome, children,” said the Shamba, his voice booming out of his beard. His eyes peered out of his face, wrinkled as a map you wanted to travel.

“Welcome, Leader,” they said.

“I am the Father,” he said.

“You are the Father.”

“We are one,” he said.

“We are one,” they echoed.

Everyone joined hands as the bowl went around the room, and tears came to people’s eyes.

"We have a journey to make together," he said.

"Yes, Father."

"Our family is the world," he said.

"Yes, Father."

"We will bring the world to us."

"Yes, Father."

I felt hot and happy, my hands squeezed on either side by Ingrid and David. Shamba spoke about happiness and the mission we all had: to take blows, to endure insults if necessary, to ensure that everyone had the peace we felt, that everyone had such happiness. Then we all swayed, and the bowl went around again. It went around again and again.

Finally, Shamba sat down, and Max, a man in his fifties, spoke for a moment about the need for unity. We sang several songs, and even if you didn't know the words, they seemed to come to you out of your heart.

The bowl went around again.

When the ceremony was over, Shamba came and kissed my forehead, and I wept, falling to the ground at his feet. I kissed his sandals as he walked away.

"I can't stand up," I giggled to Ingrid and David.

Ingrid smiled. "Let me help you," and then David said, "Let me help you," and they led me off to bed.

There was a communal room, I realized, with big beds separated by curtains. My overnight bag was stowed under a bed. "Here you go," David said and started pulling back the bedspread. Ingrid did the same on the other side.

Just then I realized how strange everything was, and I blinked. "I want to go home. I wouldn't want my parents to call when I'm out."

But they knew I had told my parents I was staying with a friend.

"You are home," said David, and he touched my cheek, as he tucked me into bed. He started taking off my blouse and caressing my back. "That's nice," I murmured. "Look," I said. "Let me get my nightgown."

"That's not necessary." And then he started to kiss my back, or was it Ingrid? I started to pass out as the most delicious feeling filled my breasts, and I had dreams of both Ingrid and David kissing them over and over and over, and then David on top of me.

I woke alone, with my nightgown on, alone in the big bed with the curtains drawn all around, and I knew I must have imagined everything. Still, I had an odd feeling that I must get home, that I must talk with my family as quickly as possible. I got my duffel bag out from under the bed and headed for the bathroom. It was occupied, so I sat against the wall and waited.

It was David coming out. "Where are you going?" he said.

"Studying, you know." I felt shy about him all of a sudden and blinked away my bizarre dreams. "I have a lot to do."

He laughed. "Oh no you don't," he said.

"What?" I was stubborn after all, and suddenly he was making me nervous. There was something stern behind his expression I didn't like. "I have a test on Monday. I have to get back."

"We'll get you back on time." He smiled; the old David was back. "Let me get you a cup of coffee. You have to have your breakfast, right?"

My fear dissipated. "Okay." I looked down at my nightgown. "Let me change first."

"Don't bother," he said. "Come on." He put his arm around my shoulder. He left it a little too long on my shoulder blade, and it felt oddly familiar. I couldn't help leaning into him, as if something in me was responding, and I didn't know who that person was.

The moment was gone quickly, and he disappeared through the doorway of the kitchen, appearing in a second with two cups of coffee. "Here," he said.

"Men waiting on women," I said. "I like it." I sat down on a chair in the room used last night for the service; now it just looked like a living room, the common room where we did the work for Shamba.

David laughed as he sat down on the arm of a chair. He was wearing grey clothes, thin cotton sweats and a thin cotton shirt. "How's the coffee?"

"It's delicious," I said and meant it. I had never had anything like it; there was something so aromatic about it that you had to drain every drop. In a few moments I had.

"More," I said and laughed.

"Of course," David said and in a second was back with another. I felt good and happy and wondered why I had felt I had to rush off like that to get home.

Then I remembered I had tasted something faintly like that: in the bowl the night before.

"I'm tired," I said.

"Of course you are," David said, taking the cup from me and carrying me to bed. "Let me help you."

"Do it myself," I said, getting into the sheets.

David slapped me hard across the cheek, then kissed me as quickly. "You do as I say," he said.

I was so tired.

"Do you hear me?" he said and slapped me and kissed me again.

"I do what you say," I said. Then he was kissing me, and how many times and where I could not say.

It was late when I woke up, with darkness coming into my room. I sat at the edge of my bed and waited. I waited a long time.

David walked in with Ingrid. "It's time to go," he said. "You have a test tomorrow."

"Yes," I said.

"I'll ride back with you," said Ingrid. She had some clothes in her hands. They were grey like David's. "You'll find these more comfortable for the ride home."

"Thank you." I looked at David. "When may I take them off?"

He smiled and leaned over, kissing me on the cheek. I loved the feeling. I closed my eyes to the memory of the delicious feeling all over my breasts and opened my eyes again. "Whenever you wish, Sister."

When we got back to the dorm, it was as if I had returned to another world. It was late, and, although some stereos were blaring, most people were in bed. Ingrid touched my arm as she headed down to her room. "You are wonderful, Sister." She called back over her shoulder, "Good luck on your test."

The test went surprisingly well, given that I hadn't studied. I didn't do as well as usual—I usually got A's—but I felt that with what I'd learned in class, I had earned at least a B. I was amazed at what I was capable of doing. I smiled during the test as I fingered

my cotton clothes; I found that I loved them; they were soft and comfortable, and they made me belong.

I was restless all day and felt that I had to get to the farmhouse. I camped out on Ingrid's doorstep and had to wait until her classes were over. She made me wait another two hours.

She smiled as she walked up, briskly. "I knew you would be waiting."

I wanted to say, "Where have you been?" but I knew the rules. "When are we going?"

"Come into my room," she said. I realized I had never been in there. Inside the door she touched my cheek and kissed me all along my cheekbone. "We are going now, Sister. We are going now." She dropped her bookbag and locked the door. "David is waiting," she said as we ran down the hallway and laughed.

By the time we reached the farmhouse, I felt crazed, almost sick. My hands were shaking. When Ingrid noticed, she took one in her hand and smiled. After the bus pulled away, she kissed it.

Shamba House looked different to me—mystical, radiant. There were five or six people in the main room working on pamphlets—some writing, others doing some designing and xeroxing.

"Where's David?" Ingrid said, looking at a woman I recognized as Eileen. She had a plain, round face, her dark brown hair pulled back into a bun.

Eileen smiled. "He's in the night room."

"She's ready," said Ingrid.

Eileen stood up and smiled, taking the hand that Ingrid held and kissing it. Together they led me to David in the bed, where he was lying in his grey clothes, reading.

"She's ready," Ingrid said again. David smiled and sat up, taking my hand. As Ingrid and Eileen walked away, Eileen said, "That's the way it's supposed to happen. She's lucky."

But my mind was on David. He took my face in his hand and examined it. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

I shook my head no, then paused, adding, "But it's whatever you say."

He smiled and said, "I don't think we need a drink first today, do you?"

"No."

He got up and pulled the curtains all around. I started to shake so much that my hands seemed to have lives of their own. David smiled as he walked to me and took my hands. "You don't need to be afraid, Sister-Wife." And my hands went still.

Then all the things I half-remembered were true, and the memories of the other times rose up. But now I saw everything clearly: I was his and had been already. My body buckled under pleasure so delicious it could only be what I had waited for all my life.

David and I were there for three days. The others brought us food and drinks and smiled as they looked through the curtains and walked away. The drinks heightened things, as always, and then made me tired, so that it was hard to know whether Ingrid joined us or not, or if that's just what David said that he wanted, her on my other breast.

Finally Eileen walked in and said that Shamba had said that it was time for me to go, that I must return to the university to fulfil his mission. I wept and grabbed at the covers, but David told me it was best. I put on my grey clothes and followed him out. Then he told me, "You are to pay attention to Eileen. She is Shamba's woman, as is Ingrid."

I followed Eileen into the common room, and she handed me some pamphlets and boxes of materials. "You will continue going to your classes," she said. She smiled and dimpled. "You are to call and tell your professors you've been sick and give them this number. David will take care of that." She paused and looked at me. "We don't want anyone to get the wrong idea about Shamba. You are to call your parents and tell them you've been fine, staying with a friend. As for your mission, you are to watch the students: anyone who is lonely, anyone who looks different and alone you are to approach. You may show them a pamphlet, if you wish. Keep the boxes in your room, in case someone asks to help. Be friendly. If a person seems right for Shamba, bring that person here." She looked up at a picture of Shamba on the wall. "If you need help, ask Ingrid."

"When do I get to come back?" Already the need for David was swallowing me like a drug.

"We will always know when you are ready," she said. "You must wait until we call for you."

“In how many days?” I asked, my words desperate and strange, even to myself.

Eileen’s face was stern and blank. “We will call you when we need you. In the meantime you have your work to do.”

Ingrid appeared from another part of the building and led me away. “It’s all right,” she said as we walked to the car, then were dropped off before the long way toward the bus stop. “It’s never more than you can handle.” She squeezed my arm. “Shamba said that he wanted me with you, and he is my Father-Husband. I am to watch over you.”

“I am grateful to you, Sister Ingrid,” I said, lowering my head and waiting.

I did everything they told me to do. The first thing I did was call my parents, in case they had called when I was away. I called my professors and received my make-up work. I roamed the halls of the dormitory and listened for crying behind the doors, people sitting alone in the cafeteria. In a week I had found three people suitable for Shamba.

At night I studied feverishly for my classes, and my professors were sympathetic about my illness. I started earning A’s again, and to all outsiders it seemed I was once again myself. Each day I was filled with a purpose that transformed me, that made me strong in my mission.

I had to be ready because I never knew what time of day it would be. There would be a knock on my door, and it would be Ingrid, saying, “It is time.” I dropped everything right where it was and walked out the door.

David was always waiting on the bed, reading a book. Sometimes he would offer me my drink, which I would swallow immediately. Sometimes we would wait. It didn’t matter. By then my need for David was so strong, it was all mixed up with the drink in my body, and I did everything he asked.

Sometimes Ingrid or Eileen would join us for a while. I didn’t mind. Eileen was the mirror of Ingrid, slapping my face and kissing it, or kissing my breast while David kissed the other. As wives of Shamba, they sealed the marriage of everyone else in the group so that we were all joined. Both had confessed pasts that Shamba felt made them suitable for such a task, and his blessing made it holy.

In brief moments, I wondered what the purpose of everything was, although my job in the mission was simply to bring people to Shamba. The family grew bigger, and it *was* wonderful to have a family with one united purpose. I looked forward to the service, which we had once a month, and it seemed everyone else did too, when we sat in a circle while Shamba spoke to us, his family. There was an air of controlled chaos about it, as we drank to the point when we stumbled off with our partners into the night room, where through the curtains we could hear the wails and cries of love.

The money came in through donations, which some members gathered around the university, sitting outside stores and playing guitars. Some learned how to receive money by telephone, although I never received that task. I was told it was a sweepstakes involved with magazines that were never mailed, although the cheques came faithfully to the post office box every day.

Things might have gone in this way until my graduation, if I hadn't become pregnant with David's baby.

He wept with happiness when I told him. "To be fruitful and multiply: that is one of the tenets of Shamba," he said. He drew me to him and said, "We are married. You know that."

I nodded.

"But now we must marry before your parents. We will have another ceremony for them." He looked at me, while I pictured him mixing with my crazy family. It seemed impossible: stern, serene David sitting at the table with my father playing cards. "But then we will come back here. It will be the same again."

I nodded. "It will always be the same."

"You must not mention the drink," he said. "You will have to be strong during the childmonths, and we will give you some when you need it. But I will not do anything to the child."

I nodded. "I can do anything you ask." Already I had had days when I had had to bite down on sheets to get through the pain, my longing for the drink.

David turned and smiled. Suddenly he slapped me several times across the face; I did not flinch. I said again, "I can do anything you ask."

He kissed me all over my face and said, "I know you can, Sister-Wife."

Returning home with David was like returning to a past I couldn't believe. My parents had been silent on the phone when I told them the news—both about the baby and about David—but then laughed through their tears and told me to come home.

We wore regular streetclothes, and we both felt odd in them. I was wearing a spring dress, and the wind under my skirt made me sick. My feet looked exposed in my sandals. David looked like anybody in his chinos and plaid shirt, and it took a stern look from him to make me not notice.

My parents greeted us at the front door: my father with a martini in his hand and my mother in a long sequined dress. "Dahling, it's been so long," she said and laughed, hugging us both.

"Your boyfriend is so serious," my father said.

"Serious about me," I added, and David smiled.

The evening went along like that, with me covering all the silences, until there were no more. Everything was all right. I thought that David would object when my mother gave us separate rooms, laughing, "You're not married, you know."

"You are quite right," he said.

She paused, "Even under the circumstances."

"I understand," he said. But he came to me; he came to me at night in my parents' home. I had done everything that he wanted, and he did everything he wanted to me. The memories of all the other times rose in my skin.

My parents learned to care for David, even though my father said he was too severe and my mother said he could be more fun. They loved little May with her blonde, blonde hair and her face shaped just like David's.

The problem came when we moved back to Shamba House. Of course, everyone loved little May, one of the first children to grow up right in the middle of the family. Shamba himself gave the blessing over her, and David and I both wept. Eileen made a corner cradle for her, and she slept in a curtained-off partition of her own, so that anyone who was not busy could attend to her.

My parents, somehow, found out where Shamba House was—I think they asked one of the new followers who had car duty, but

it was never clear to me. They showed up one day with some relatives: my Aunt Mary with her big purse full of causes, and my Uncle Roger who had a habit of carrying a pet mouse named Ginger in his front shirt pocket.

“Good Lord,” said Aunt Mary walking in, her purse banging against a box of Shamba materials, “you didn’t say it was a cult.”

My parents looked around. David and I were working on some brochures in the common room, and we jumped up.

“We call it communal living,” said David, looking calm and yet stern in his grey clothes.

“Who is that on the wall?” my father asked.

“Shamba,” a new convert said without thinking, “the father of us all.”

“Madeline,” my mother said, rattling her bracelets, “where’s the baby?”

“In the other room,” I said.

“Get her,” she said.

I was used to commands. May was sleeping, her little fist brushing against her mouth. I wrapped her in a blanket and came out of the night room.

“David?” I said.

I knew he must have a plan, but he said nothing. “David?” I asked.

“Leave if you want to,” he said. The power started to drain from my legs.

“Madeline?” said my mother. “Help her, for God’s sake.” She grabbed little May, and my father and uncle dragged me away. Suddenly I screamed for David.

He did nothing. “You’ll be back,” he said. “You won’t have a choice.”

By the time my parents got me and May home and called the police, the farmhouse was deserted. They also called a doctor, who said I was going through drug withdrawal, and he would help.

The police called back. “Watch out for the husband. You might want a security guard.” They hired one on the spot.

I didn’t know how I felt. On the one hand my yearning for David was so unbearable I wept until I had to be tied down. Still, learning I had an actual addiction made it easier somehow to bear;

all the suffering I had undergone before during the childmonths had been for David, you see. I was used to suffering for David.

Rocks started coming through the windows at night; my parents received threatening phone calls. It got so bad that when a car backfired my parents thought it was a gun.

I knew that the members of Shamba were like the sands in the desert; where one disappeared another came. When it was safe for me to leave the house—and always with someone else—I felt that I saw the brothers and sisters of Shamba everywhere, in every aisle of the grocery store, walking along the street to work. It was not required that followers wear their grey clothes, so like the conventional sweatsuit; in fact, it was easier to penetrate the populace without them.

One day someone whispered in my ear, “You will never escape the children of Shamba,” and the crowd was so dense and my fear so great I had no idea who had spoken. My heart raced, and, when I told my mother, she wept.

At night, though, I dreamed of David, of David and Ingrid, of David, Ingrid, and Eileen, and I was filled with such longing I felt that if my parents didn't do something I would do anything to find the brothers and sisters of Shamba, that I would do anything they asked. My parents said that I was a prisoner, and, with my head down, I said that this was something I understood and could obey.

Four months passed, and I was feeling better. Little May was out in a cradle in the back yard, and my mother, father, and I were having a picnic. Most of the time I could forget about my experiences with Shamba and just focus on my life. “How could you have gotten involved with such crazy people?” my mother wondered. She was lounging on a blanket and painting her toenails a sequence of colours, as if the rainbow had suddenly grown metallic and strange.

I couldn't say, as I watched my father working on the garden at the other end of the yard. He had finished his own lunch a while ago and was working on his latest project. His garden was huge, the garden you might expect of people who had worked with plants all their lives. My father, after all, was a man of enthusiasms—if a little out of shape for this one. He was digging in the dirt with a hoe and every few seconds wiped his brow. My mother smiled

and said my father had planted so much we'd have to give half of the garden away.

"I'd like to go back to school," I said.

My mother had started on her fingernails and looked up, smiling. "We always wanted something grand for you," she said. She paused. "It made us sad when things changed, when you became so serious." She grasped for words. "You always were serious—I suppose somebody had to be in this house—but serious in this other way." She touched my arm. "Whatever happened to your writing, your dreams?" she asked. "Of course, there's May, but there's yourself to consider too."

"I don't know," I replied.

"When my nails dry, I'll make some fresh iced tea to celebrate," she said, as she waved the nails of many colours through the air like butterflies.

"That would be nice," I said.

I started to doze, and later I felt my mother's hand trail across my hair as she went in to get the iced tea. It was hypnotic and lovely out there, the kind of day when you feel anything is possible. In the background someone was mowing a lawn. Someone shouted from a pool and splashed.

Then my mother screamed. I opened my eyes. There was David walking across the lawn with little May. My father, busy with his produce, at first didn't see him. Then, with a horrified look, he flung down his hoe and ran after David. In a moment Father had May in his arms.

I can't quite describe what happened next. David went after May, and I pictured King Solomon with the baby about to be torn in two. I screamed, blinked, and screamed again.

By then David had fallen into my father's garden, cascading through tomatoes and peppers, stumbling over cucumbers. It was the hoe that stopped him.

My father dialed 911, but in a few hours David was dead.

May is five now, and my life with her is lovely. For a couple of years I lived with my parents, while I finished school, and now I work in a library. I like the people who work there—serious people, whose lives focus on books and how to get them to people in as efficient a way as possible.

David's death was categorized an accident, and no one came forward from Shamba to contest it, or to claim May as belonging to the group. Occasionally I hear of such groups springing up at other universities, and there was an exposé on CNN of a group that had prospered in the Philippines. I feel sometimes that I'd like to write to warn people, but what is there that you can finally do to prevent the crossing over from loneliness to despair? I am ashamed of that part of my life and work every day to show my parents that I can transform into something worthy of them and myself.

My mother has found some work for May as a child actress. I'm not really big on it, and have said that it has to be what May wants. She is blonde and beautiful, and there's something about her that makes people think of their dreams. Even for me she does this, and it is wonderful. She starts out looking serious like her father; then she sways, and then she sings. When she dances onstage under all those lights, she can become anything you want. She can do anything you ask.