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Body and Soul

JULY 17, 1959. THE HOT SUN bears down on the Olduvai Gorge, the early morning coolness now past, as the hour edges toward eleven. Mary Leakey, in short-sleeved shirt and khakis, has been wandering alone amid the scree for hours. She shifts her wide-brimmed straw hat to a better angle against the painfully bright light, catches the silhouette of a vulture searching for prey. By noon the glare will make distinguishing fossils from mere stones almost impossible. Already the black-and-white of the two Dalmatians cavorting along beside her seems more intense than it was.

Half a world away, the heat rises slowly, the muggy New York night still buttery as avocado, heavy. In a room at the Metropolitan Hospital, Billie Holiday lies in a medley of dreams, dying. It is all finally becoming clear to her, each moment crystalline like a perfect note. She has never felt more candidly lucid. A sleight-of-heart, this sudden memory avalanche, and before the final forfeit there are still astonishments. At first a black sound that is the absence of sound, a voracious silence, then she's standing in front of the microphone, hearing her own voice singing itself into existence. And then the applause, there's always the applause, which makes her feel both loved and afraid, carefree and melancholy. It has become her trademark, this sad insouciance.

Mary thinks of her artist father, long deceased, how he would have admired the dogs' incongruity against the background of stratified rock, red, grey. He would have loved the steep cliffs, sisal, acute sky, the profound mind-calming silence which makes true hearing possible. She is sure that he, too, would have heard the dry winds whisper across the Serengeti Plains, winds bearing the haunting bark of zebras and a thousand hooves thrumming across the grasslands. She misses him, is keenly aware of all the years since his passing. Senses the eons that have brought her here, the volcanic eruptions, the shifting of faults, the process of erosion. The ancient sediment

shifts under her feet with each step as she traverses the paradox of the solid earth, which isn't entirely solid, sheltering its prehistoric secrets, its buried human narrative.

Swaggering toward a front table where Billie has made sure a chair has been saved, Louis, tall and dapper, smoothes his thin moustache. He's wearing his widest ate-the-canary grin and the expensive new topcoat she recently bought for him. He's late again, which makes her feel like crying. But she doesn't, she sings instead. My man don't love me, treats me awful mean. My man he don't love me, treats me awful mean. He's the lowest man I've ever seen. Her white gown is tight, a tourniquet which holds her in, holds her together. She is assured by the grip of her high-heeled white shoes, the fragrant weight of the white gardenias in her hair. She's a lady, and she's fine. Louis is fine, a fine black cat. She glances at his hands. He's turning his ring around so it won't leave a permanent mark on her face later. He always makes sure he's smiling when his fist connects. The smile shows off his dimples, which he knows she admires.

Mary hates rules, always has. Has been expelled from two different convent schools. Learns to pilot gliders, identify artefacts, draw meticulously. She knows about rebellion, choice. She wants no part of mediocrity and danger doesn't frighten her. Her mother cannot get used to this. She cannot get used to Louis either. She thinks him dashing, handsome and charming, all of which are questionable traits in a husband. And question him she does, mercilessly. His boyishness does not convince her. His ambition does not convince her. She does not like his moustache nor the fact that he's ten years older than her daughter and already has a wife, a child and another baby on the way. The only thing certain about him, she tells Mary, is that he doesn't doubt his own importance, not for a minute, not ever.

Billie, too, believes in choices. She will choose who or what will hurt her. She considers this a form of freedom.

Mary pours a Scotch, lights a Cuban cigar, and puts her faith in work, the harder the better. She knows that scientists are lucky to be remembered for even one contribution past their lifetime, and interpretation is not for what she wants to be remembered. She yearns for discovery foremost. Description and documentation. Accuracy. These are the things that count. Her legacy will be in the finding. She will leave interpretation to others.

Billie dreams and dreams. Louis is a crow, his dark feathers coy and menacing. He is a vulture man, his predatory heart forever ravenous, there is never enough food, never enough food. His beak pecks away at her frayed life that can no longer be mended. In his glossy black plumage, she sees herself reflected. But then he begins his easy vagabond touching, intimate thrust, delicious euphoria. I am a fool to want you.

Even when Mary is not alone at her sites, she demands quiet. The workers want music, they want to sing. She forbids them even to talk, if it can be avoided. She believes in the focussing power of movement without words. And so the atmosphere among the workers is hushed, reverential. The only sounds: bone bits shaking in sieves, boots crunching on stone. Today Mary experiences a rare pleasure: hours of solitude, the only human voice her own and even that, beatifically silent.

Billie struggles to breathe. She's at the Phoenix Theater, attempting to rise from her ashes one last time. When you walk out there and open your mouth, you never know what's going to happen. Bright as a valentine at the back of the room, her mother's red velvet bird-of-paradise hat. And there behind it, Lester Young, the Pres, holding his tenor saxophone as far out in front of him as he can, trying to give it more space, more air. He plays for pleasure, happens upon grace, the sweetness of it lingering in the phrasing, the nuances between notes. But the Pres is dead, just as her mother is dead. Billie knows this, and more, much more. She knows she will be next, has no appetite for anything but gin, has had more than a quart already. The elbow-length gloves cover the needle marks but can't hide her upper arms, which are alarmingly scrawny like matchsticks. She is a tattered bird, too feeble almost to stand, the weak light hard on her face. But feeling has always sung her, not the other way around, and so she sings—badly, but still she sings, her scorched voice bare and absolute as bone.

You dig for one thing and you find something quite different. There are so many stories to be discovered. And every one you find is different from the one you expected.

Louis isn't the first in the flock of crows, but he is the last. His powerful wings cast a smothering shadow. The music gets faster, louder, the applause is endless. Her favourite mink coat, her mother's embrace, thick bar smoke, safety. To be a child without the helplessness. Like flight, not possible.

It's always a surprise. A sudden sharp whiteness catches Mary's eye. She crouches down, carefully brushes away the earth to reveal part of a skull. She brushes away more. Gently, gently. The base of a jaw appears, and embedded in it two molars four times the size of her own. She is certain they are human. She takes one deep breath after another, tries to rein in her excitement. She walks as quickly as she can back to the Land Rover, wishes the winding path out of the gorge wasn't so treacherous. Even before she reaches the shoulders of the canyon, she pushes down hard on the accelerator.

Billie opens her mouth for the last time. There are no words, there is only a breath, silence.

It will take Mary fifteen minutes to get back to the camp where Louis lies ill with the flu. "I've got him! I've got him! I've got him!" she says, dancing from one foot to the other. Her pale eyes have given up their usual steeliness, are intense as blue flames. Louis is feverish, thinks he's dreaming.

"Who have you got, Mary?"

"I've got our Dear Boy! I've got our earliest man."

Billie Holiday dies at 3:20 a.m. A poet will write of seeing her face on the front page of the New York Post. Many will mourn. Some will attempt interpretation. Louis McKay will consider his fortune.

It will take Mary eighteen months to piece together the four hundred pieces of her skull puzzle. In the meantime, Louis Leakey will give interviews, travel to conferences, acquire grant money, preen in front of his peers. He will father all the happy enterprise that follows. She will present a content face and go about her business with diligence collecting fossils and facts, facts and fossils.

Billie will continue to sing herself into the future, her voice a fact, a fossil. Neither.