

KING GEORGE

At night George crept to the edge of the light and listened to the men. Most were grown-ups, but there were a few boys who looked to be young teens, not much older than him. They sat on overturned logs in a clearing in the forest, AK-47's slung around their shoulders, joking loudly and drinking beer. Their fire burned until morning, someone always awake to toss on more wood. George didn't understand most of what they talked about, but he watched and listened anyway, hoping to learn. He sat behind a tree, tracing his finger in the dust, spelling out words they used that he didn't know. He drew pictures of their guns, too, and the women they talked about, then erased them with his feet. The men never saw him, and wouldn't have known who he was.

In the day he sold soccer jerseys in the city. The white tourists had all been scared off and hardly anyone bought from him anymore. He roamed the same roads over and over, not selling and not caring that he didn't sell. Government trucks rolled by frequently and the other cars yielded. Many of the trucks had a megaphone attached to the roof:

“Women must remain in sight of their men. Prayers are in fifteen minutes.”

George spat on the trucks. Only when he was sure that no one saw him, but he did it. He spat as they rattled past, and once he even flung a rock at the windshield of an empty truck, parked outside a restaurant at lunch time. The glass didn't shatter with as much violence as he hoped – it just spider-webbed. Still, he was pleased, and always looked for more empty trucks. It was hard to get up the nerve, though.

Through all this, his daytime wandering and his nighttime eavesdropping, George thought of his mother. She'd been gone now for several months, her memory a specter that both haunted and comforted him. She was a beautiful woman, and he knew this wasn't simply the opinion of a devoted son. All the men said so, even though they weren't supposed to notice. They claimed she wanted them to notice, that her clothes gave her away. George's father had left several years earlier and she occasionally had boyfriends, the last one being Mr. Irving, a friendly Australian aid worker.

His mother loved history and loved America, so she named her only child after America's last king under British rule, George III. She used to say that things would be better if they had a king, just one person in charge, not dozens of little kings. She told George he would make a good king because he had a sense of fairness and thought about the needs of others.

He came home one day and the house was empty. Nothing out of place – the water jug sat by the door, the comb in front of the mirror where she fixed her hair, their clothes stacked and folded in plastic bins on the floor; it was just his mother that was missing. He ended up staying with neighbors, who gave him only sketchy explanations regarding what had happened. George's mother was considered an adulterer, having never officially obtained a divorce from his father. Mr. Irving – also implicated – had fled the region, seeking safety. There was some sort of legal proceeding, but nobody would tell George where it took place or what the outcome was.

After several weeks had passed, the matriarch of the family – a stern, wizened grandmother – took him aside and explained that his mother would not be coming back.

“It's their law,” she said. “The new law.”

He stayed a while longer with these neighbors, but it wasn't right. He felt guilty knowing they ate less because of him, so he left. He walked the streets all day and slept in the forest at night, leaning against the trees he hid behind when watching the men. He went back to his house only once, to get clothes.

The thing that happened swallowed him whole and every day a bit more was digested. During the days he thought often of the men's fire in the woods; he obsessed about it, waiting for night to come so he could sit and watch again, unable to rid his mind of the orange flames, fascinated that something immaterial could consume such endless quantities of fuel. He even

personified it, admiring the fire for being fierce, unafraid, for pulsing its light in defiance of the miles of darkness pressing in on all sides. Sometimes when he saw the men's firewood supply getting low, he gathered brush for them and dropped it surreptitiously in one of their walking paths.

George wanted to take up arms like the men he watched, but he was only ten years old. He didn't even know what side they were on, just that they were the answer, their strength and virile camaraderie offering sustenance to some part of him that was wasting away. He built up his nerves for the night he would walk into their circle. No introductions, just find a seat among them and join the conversation, using words he learned in the countless nights he had listened.