Grace was the one who brought me to the Elephant Hills Lodge, and when I remember it now I feel as if she's the one who knows what I did there, even though there's no way she really could.

On the day I ran into Grace, I had been traveling in India for nine months, but I had just arrived in Africa and Nairobi was depressing me. It was dirty and grey and the buildings were modern and shabby. The street kids sniffed glue and when they asked you for money it felt as though they were staring straight through you. They made me so sad but, while I should have been sad for them, my sadness was much more self-absorbed. I missed my mom and my sister and, although I hadn't thought I was looking for anything in particular when I came to Africa, I felt the disappointment of some vague expectation that I couldn't articulate. I knew that whatever I was looking for was probably something that I would never find, but I also knew that if there was even a slight chance of finding it, it wouldn't happen in Nairobi, and so I wanted to finish my business (bank, visas, post office etc.) and leave for the jungle, or the mountains, or just somewhere else as soon as possible.

That was what I was thinking about when I ran into Grace. I had been wandering around all morning just to get out of my lonely dusty hotel room and I had turned onto a street with trees because it made me feel as though I weren't in Nairobi. Grace was coming from the opposite direction and turned onto the street at the same time as I did. She wore a bright blue and yellow school uniform and appeared to be about nine years old.

"How are you, Madame?" she asked me. She sounded so cute the way her voice was formal
and familiar at the same time. Her hair was cut to her scalp, like how all of the schoolgirls wore it, but on her, with her strong jaw-line, it looked stylish.

"I am fine." I pronounced each word slowly like she did, partly so she would understand me, and partly because I liked the way she talked.

"How are you?"

"I am fine," she said. "You are coming to our Lodge?"

"No. I have a lodge already."

We kept walking down the street until she stopped in front of the yard that had the same trees that had first made me turn onto this street. There were vines growing between the trees and all of the vegetation made the yard seem like an oasis in the middle of the dilapidated concrete city.

Grace turned towards me. "Come and have a look," she said. Her tone sounded as if she were inviting me to a party. "Come and see us. I know you will like us."

I wasn’t considering going through the hassle of moving to a new lodge. I really just followed her because her invitation sounded so charming.

Through the vines was an open space and then a bright green building with a turquoise door. Above the door was a sign that said "ELEPHANT HILLS LODGE," in turquoise letters.

"That’s a nice name," I said.

"Yes," Grace said definitely, as if I had made a statement of fact, not opinion.

She opened the turquoise door and stepped through the doorway, and I followed her. Inside the concrete walls were painted tangerine, and the room had a cheery, tropical feeling. There was a man sitting behind a big desk whom I could tell right away was Grace’s father because he had the same long smile as Grace had. He looked so happy when he saw me that I turned around, thinking there must be someone he knew standing behind me, but there wasn’t.
“You want single room or dormitory?” he asked me.

“Oh, I’m not really looking for a room,” I said. “I was just looking.” He continued to smile at me as I realized that what I’d said hadn’t made sense – what would I be looking for at a lodge if not a room? So then I said, “I guess I’ll see the dorm room.”

He led me through the lobby into a large room that was also tangerine. Four African men and one white man were sitting in chairs with worn brown upholstery, talking in Swahili. In the corner of the room was a big, blank TV. Wires protruded out of the back and I noticed that it had no cord. On top of it was a large pink and green crocheted doily. The African men smiled at me as they continued talking. This was the first lodge I’d seen with Africans and whites both staying together and I liked the feeling of everybody sitting around, hanging out.

On the other side of the room, two African women sat at a table in front of a stove. One of them, who had a short afro, stared right at me. When I smiled at her, she smiled back but kept staring as Grace’s father led me through the room into a small grassy yard. All of the rooms, which also had turquoise doors, opened into this yard.

Grace’s father unlocked the door to the women’s dorm room. The first thing I noticed was that it was empty, except for about ten mats on the floor which were all unoccupied. I hadn’t actually considered moving until that moment.

“You see this lodge is very clean,” he said. “Very nice for foreigners. You bring your friends.”

“I don’t have any friends in Nairobi,” I told him. What I was thinking then was that if I moved here I could pay for a dorm bed and get a whole room to myself. I did really want to get out of Nairobi, and switching lodges would probably add another day to my time here, but
on the other hand, this was the first place I’d found in Nairobi that actually had a good feeling to it. I thought about it for a second, and then I told him I’d take a dorm bed.

He looked very happy. “You bring your friends,” he told me again, “and the dormitory and all rooms will be filled with foreigners.”

When I came back later that afternoon Grace’s father looked very happy again, until he realized that the people from the other lodge whom I had shared a taxi with were not coming in.

But Grace still looked happy. She followed me through the yard and then waited until I came back out of the dorm room to sit on the grass and read. When she saw what I was doing she left and came back with a book and some paper and sat down besides me. “I am going to do my work now,” she told me, and she opened her book and began to copy English words from the book onto the paper. As we were sitting there, the sun came out. After a little while she looked over at me and said, “Now I am going to do my exercises,” and then she stood up and did twenty-five jumping jacks.

She continued to do her school work until her father called her, and then she went into the back of the lodge where they lived, and I didn’t see her again for the rest of the day.

When it began to get dark and I went to make my dinner, the two African women were already in the kitchen cooking. The woman with the short afro, who had stared at me when I first came in, was chopping vegetables. She stared at me again. Above the stove was a sign that said: “Please Please Please Do your dishes soon after eating BY ORDER.”

The other woman had straightened hair. She was stirring something in a pot. My first two nights in Nairobi I had eaten in a restaurant, and
so I wasn’t used to cooking and all I had was an avocado and some bread. When the woman with the straightened hair saw me making my avocado sandwich she said, “You will eat with us.”

“Really?” I said. “OK. Thanks.”

While she cooked she told me that her name was Elizabeth and her friend, the one with the afro, was Mildred. They had come from Tanzania, bringing things to sell in Nairobi. As Elizabeth talked, Mildred kept looking up from her chopping at me. While they were selling their things in Nairobi, Elizabeth told me, they bought pens and soap and underwear to bring back and sell in Tanzania. She said she had made the trip many times, but this was Mildred’s first trip, her first time in Kenya.

Even though I didn’t think Mildred spoke English, I wanted to say something to her because she kept looking at me, so I told her that it was my first time in Kenya too. She looked surprised that I had talked directly to her and I was surprised too when she answered me.

“In Tanzania,” she said, “the whites just keep to themselves, and we keep to ourselves.”

For dinner we had greens and ugali, a thick porridge made out of maize flour. We ate at a small table between the kitchen and the main room where the men were sitting. A dim light bulb hung from the ceiling above the middle of the table and made it feel as if we were sitting around a campfire. Elizabeth put a spoon out for me, but they both seemed happy when I ate with my hands like they did. I told them I would make dinner for them tomorrow. As we ate, every once in a while Mildred looked at me closely, as though she were wondering what I was going to do next. Elizabeth had obviously talked to many other white people before, but when Mildred looked at me she seemed fascinated, almost infatuated, as if she were seeing into another world. Her expression gave
me that same feeling when I looked at her.

All evening the white man had been sitting and talking with some of the African men in the room off of the kitchen. He sat in the corner where he could survey the whole scene in both rooms, and even though the light was dim and I couldn't really see his face, I could feel him looking all around the room and sometimes into the kitchen. And even though I hadn't met him, and didn't know anything about him, for some reason I avoided his eyes. Our eyes met briefly only once, when he came into the kitchen, and when he smiled at me I looked away.

When I went to wash my dishes I noticed another sign above the sink that said: "Please Please Please No smoking in the kitchen BY ORDER."

Then the lights went out.

"So even in Kenya the power is going," Mildred said. In the blackness I could imagine her shaking her head.

Then Elizabeth lit a candle and I saw their faces again. "It is the same in all places," Elizabeth said. "But not in her country." She looked at me.

"I like it," I said. "It feels like camping." As I said this, I realized that they, of course, didn't go camping. "It feels quieter to me or something, better for talking."

"Like in the village," Mildred said. "I think you would like Tanzania, in the village. I think you would like it so much." She sounded excited. Then she said, "I want to bring you to my village."

"Really?"

"But in the village," Elizabeth warned me, "we live like primitive people." I was looking at her when Mildred reached over and picked up a piece of my hair. She looked at it and ran her fingers down it.

"Is it original?" she asked.

Elizabeth laughed at her.
“Yeah,” I said, “it’s original.”

She continued to examine it. I smiled.

“It is very thin,” she said. “Is this its normal condition, or is it sick?”

I laughed then, because I didn’t want it to seem as if this had offended me. “No,” I said, “this is how it’s supposed to be.”

After dinner, Mildred and Elizabeth invited me to their room to show me some of the things they had to sell. In their room there were several closed suitcases and bags that were zipped shut, piled in the corner. Elizabeth opened one of the bags and took out a pair of red high-heeled shoes and a yellow polo shirt. She told me that they would look “very smart” on me, and that they were selling them for “a very reasonable price.” I felt uncomfortable for a moment, but they didn’t seem to mind when I told them that I couldn’t buy any new clothes right now.

When I left their room and walked through the yard, the light in the white man’s room was on, and when I got closer I saw that he was sitting near the door, looking out. He said hello and so I stopped to talk to him. He told me that his name was Paul and he was from Germany. He looked about thirty-five or forty. “This is your first time in Africa?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. Right away I didn’t want to talk to him, but at the same time I was embarrassed about the way I had been avoiding him all night for no real reason and so I tried to sound friendly to make up for it. “I’ve been in India and I just got to Africa a couple days ago.”

“Yes, I could see it,” he said.

“See what?”

He ignored my question. “So you have come to go on a safari, to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, to take lots of photos.” His tone threw me off for a second, and then I realized: he was making fun of me. I didn’t know what to say so I just looked at him. I tried to give him a look of contempt but he didn’t seem to mind. Actually he had a
faint smile that made it seem as though he liked it. I was deciding if I was going to just walk out of his room or if I was going to say something first, when I noticed a small black box with a cord on the floor.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Battery charger,” he said like I was hoping he would.

I rarely listened to my Walkman anymore because good batteries were so expensive and the others only lasted a few hours. In India I’d known a traveler who’d had a battery charger and I’d wanted to find one ever since. Paul’s rudeness now seemed unimportant at the prospect of not having to ration my Walkman use.

“Where’d you get it?” I asked him.

“On River Road,” he said. “But it is not a place where you can go. It is not safe for you to go there.”

“What?”

“It is not safe for you. You could not handle it. I have seen the way you are talking to these women. You think you can trust everyone. Sometimes these women can be very nice, but they always want something.”

“So? Everybody wants something.” It was a relief to be offended on Mildred and Elizabeth’s behalf instead of my own.

“You think you can come here and be friends with everyone, but you don’t understand these people. They are very simple people. You have to know how to be with them. You can be friendly . . .”

“I can? Oh thanks.”

“. . . but you have to treat them like they are a bit lower than you. That is what they understand. Otherwise they will not respect you.”

I just looked at him. “Whatever,” I finally said, because I couldn’t think of anything else to say. But as soon as I said it I regretted it because
I sounded like a valley girl, like some stupid American girl. He looked satisfied, as if that had been exactly what he had expected me to say.

The next morning I woke up early and tried to meditate. I knew that whatever I was looking for in Africa had to do with attaining some state of mind in which I felt more awake and alive in the present moment, and I sometimes felt like this was happening when I meditated. But that morning I couldn’t concentrate because I kept thinking about going to Mildred’s village. The way I imagined it, people in the village already lived more in the present moment, without having to meditate.

Afterwards I went into the kitchen to make an avocado sandwich for breakfast. One of the African men was at the sink, brushing his teeth. I might not have even noticed it except that Grace’s father was there too, and he looked at the man brushing his teeth in the sink, and then at me, as if I had seen something that I wasn’t supposed to see.

That day I went to the Ugandan embassy and the Tanzanian embassy. I couldn’t tell if anything would come of Mildred’s invitation to her village but I thought I’d find out about a visa just in case. The more I thought about it, the more visiting Mildred’s village sounded like exactly what I wanted to do next.

I had decided to make Mildred and Elizabeth spaghetti, so I went to the market and got tomatoes, onions, garlic, and I even found some basil. Then I went to the supermarket and bought pasta.

After the supermarket I went to River Road, which was near my old lodge, to see if I could find a battery charger. The whole area was crowded and dusty, with vendors crammed together, each with their merchandise spread in front of them on the sides of the street. Some sold batteries and nail polish and bootleg cassette
tapes and socks and hair extensions. Others sold second-hand clothes and clothes that were unworn, but were too out-of-fashion to sell in the Western country that they were originally made for. My presence caused a great stir and the vendors called out to me and all told me that their clothes would look “very smart” on me. Their tone was aggressively jovial with a desperate undertone that made me as lonely as I had been before Grace found me.

“Madame, Madame,” a man called to me excitedly. I tried to ignore him until he got closer and I realized he was one of the men from the lodge. “Yes, hello Madame. You come and see my friend’s shop,” he said, and so I followed him to his friends spot. Spread in front of his friend, on a blanket on the pavement, were an assortment of bootlegged cassette tapes, a row of ball point pens, and a digital watch, which read 00:00.

“Madame, you buy this watch,” his friend said.

“It doesn’t even have the time.”

“Yes, my friend is coming just now to fix it,” he told me. “Then it will be working one hundred percent.”

“Maybe later,” I said, as I had been told that this was a more polite response than flat out refusing someone.

I knew a battery charger wouldn’t be easy to find. As I asked around about it, I wondered if Mildred and Elizabeth were here too. I didn’t find them or the battery charger, and wandering around there just made me feel dusty and sad and so I went back to the lodge.

When I arrived, Grace had just gotten back from school and was sitting on the lawn in front of my room. I was happy to see her waiting there for me and I got my notebook and came out to sit with her. I told her I was writing a letter to America.

“In America,” she said, “they put on lipstick and they go to their cars.” She stood up and
walked across the lawn, swinging her hips, I guess like an American woman walking to her car. "And they drive and drive and then they get out and they dance. I know. I saw them on TV."

She pursed her lips and fluffed her imaginary, long hair, "I am beautiful," she said. "I am driving my car."

She meant to be funny, but I don’t think she had expected me to laugh as hard as I did because she looked surprised. When she laughed back our eyes met and she seemed happy to have finally found someone who really got her jokes.

In the kitchen that night there was another sign up. "Please Please Please NO brushing your teeth in sink BY ORDER."

At dinner Mildred laughed because she couldn’t keep the spaghetti on her fork and so I started to eat it with my hands and then she did too. Elizabeth still ate with a fork. I told them I had looked for them on River Road.

Elizabeth said, "We are not selling on River Road, but just near there."

The power went out again as we were eating. "This is how it is in the village," Mildred said. "When you come you will see. My daughter stays in the village with my mother. I want you to see her. I want you to see my mother and my father and my brothers."

I was happy that she brought up the invitation again because it seemed like she was really serious about it. I avoided Paul’s eyes all night.

After dinner I couldn’t find my shampoo and so I figured I must have forgotten it in the shower. When I went to look, I walked along the edge of the yard to avoid passing Paul’s room. My shampoo wasn’t in the shower either, and so I took a shower without washing my hair.

After my shower, I looked all though my backpack for my shampoo but I didn’t find it. Then I sat in my room and thought about what
could have happened to it. I hoped that maybe I had left it in the shower and the woman who cleans had set it aside somewhere. Or maybe Grace’s father had – he was so worried about everything being right for me that maybe he had moved it so it wouldn’t get stolen. Then, even though I knew that I must have left it in the shower, I looked all through my backpack again. And again.

I couldn’t get to sleep that night, and so I listened to my walkman until the batteries died.

In the morning I found Grace’s father at the front desk and asked him about my shampoo.

“Shampoo?” he said.

“It’s like a special soap for your hair. It was in the shower, in the washroom. I accidentally left it there, and then last night it wasn’t there anymore.”

His shoulders and eyebrows tensed up into the same expression he had had when I had seen that man brushing his teeth in the kitchen sink. Then he looked at me, “I will find your special hair soap.” He said it so seriously that it embarrassed me. “I will search their rooms.”

“Whose?” I asked, but I knew whose he meant.

“The women.”

“No you don’t need to search their rooms. We don’t even know who it is. And it’s not really even that big of a deal.” I hesitated. “If you could find it that would be great – it’s in a silver bottle – but it’s not really that important.”

When I left the office and passed through the main room, I didn’t look at Paul who was sitting there in his regular spot.

The thing was, that shampoo actually was important, and I really did want it back. I had started using it after my mom gave me a day at an Ayurvedic spa for my birthday. The woman who did my massage said the shampoo you use
is very important because the crown chakra, which is your connection to the universe, is on the top of your head. The shampoo she recommended had almond essential oil, which, she said, is beneficial for the crown chakra. She told me that when I washed my hair with it, I should rub it in a clockwise direction on the top of my head, into my crown chakra. Of course I didn’t take her too seriously, but I got some anyway, on my mom’s bill, because I thought it must be good shampoo. I wasn’t in any way really expecting it to affect my chakras, but then after I used it, when I meditated, it seemed like sometimes I did feel my crown chakra tingle.

Since I had been traveling I had started to ration my shampoo, but even when I didn’t wash my hair, I still sometimes unscrewed the cap, poured out a tiny drop and rubbed it into the top of my head.

After I talked to Grace’s father that morning I tried to meditate, but I couldn’t focus.

Paul came out of his room as I was leaving for the day. “So the African women stole your hair product,” he said.

“Hair product? It’s called shampoo. It’s not like I really care. I was just checking to see if he might know anything.”

“The African women want to have hair like yours,” he said. “They think it will make their hair like yours.”

I sighed hard. “No they don’t.”

He smiled.

It had been almost a week since I had really washed my hair and it was stiff and rough now, and so that day when I went into town I looked for some new shampoo. The shampoo I found everywhere had a picture on the bottle of a black woman with straight hair, in high heels. I also bought a papaya to share with Mildred and Elizabeth and then I went to the post office,
which was the last of the business I had to do in Nairobi. After the post office I just walked around to avoid thinking about what to do next. Now I could leave Nairobi whenever I wanted. Walking around I didn’t make eye contact with anyone because everyone wanted me to give them money, or they wanted to book me on their safari, or maybe some of them wanted other things that I never found out about because I didn’t talk to them. Again I asked around River Road for a battery charger but no one knew what I meant.

On the way back to the lodge I examined my new shampoo bottle. Beneath the picture of the woman in high heels it said: “Modern Shampoo for Modern Hair.” I felt a pang of regret again for leaving my shampoo in the shower.

One reason I didn’t think Mildred and Elizabeth had taken my shampoo was because they didn’t seem to particularly like my hair. But Grace did.

When I got back that afternoon, I passed through the main room without looking at Paul who was talking with some of the African men. Grace was waiting for me again in the yard in front of my room, and so I got a book and came out to sit with her, and she did her homework again while I read. After awhile she asked to brush my hair, and she brushed it for a long time. As she did, she ran her fingers through it. Even as she picked snarls apart, several times she said, “It is soft.”

My shampoo bottle was silver and had black glittery letters on it. It looked foreign and expensive. As Grace brushed my hair, it occurred to me that if she had seen it in the shower, she definitely would have wanted it. Maybe Grace’s father had been so quick to blame Mildred and Elizabeth because really he thought that Grace had taken it, and if she had, then he would be able to find it. Maybe that was why he thought he could get it back.
The thing about that bottle, though, was that everyone staying at that lodge would have liked it. Most of the African men in the lodge had all come to Nairobi to sell things just like Mildred and Elizabeth had. Any of them could get some money for that bottle, and so any of them might have taken it to sell. I thought about how it would stand out, glittery and expensive-looking, amongst the second-hand clothes and bootleg tapes on River Road.

Before dinner I went to wash my hair with the shampoo I had just bought. There was no light in the shower, and only a small space between the roof and the door, but even with the dim lighting, when I poured the new shampoo into my hand I was surprised at how bright it was. Bright green. It smelled sweet and chemically. The woman at the spa had told me that the chemicals in normal cheap shampoo could remove the paint from cars. Imagine rubbing that into your crown chakra, she had said. She had also said that it’s much harder to have a harmonious connection to the universe when you’re rubbing harsh chemicals into your crown chakra.

I rinsed the shampoo from my hand and watched it slide down the drain in one big green glob.

Mildred and Elizabeth made beans and some kind of green vegetable for dinner that night and I ate with them again.

“Today,” Elizabeth said as we ate, “we have brought some things that you will like. There is one dress just like the kind that I know you like.”

“OK,” I said because it seemed rude to not at least look, and because I was curious what kind of a dress she thought I would like. “I can’t really buy anything right now, but I’ll look at it.”

Mildred and Elizabeth weren’t impressed with the papaya. Elizabeth said it was overripe and she told me, “In the village we have so much
pawpaw."

"There are so many fruits you will see when you come to the village," Mildred said. "So many fruits and so many things."

"We will be going soon," Elizabeth said, "but we will stay here when we come back. When you come to Nairobi, you come to this lodge and we will see you here."

"OK. When do you think you'll be back?"

"We will be coming in some few weeks."

"So, do you think it will be, like, two weeks? Or like four?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said, "If we are not here when you come, we will be coming."

Even though Grace's father and Paul had both accused them, it wasn't until I brought my plate to the sink after dinner that night that I even suspected Mildred and Elizabeth of taking my shampoo. At the sink, Mildred was standing in front of me and I thought I smelled it on her: almond.

When we both sat down again I leaned in towards her, to smell her hair, and I noticed Paul look at me. I waited for awhile, until he started talking with one of the African men, and then I leaned in again. This time I was sure I smelled almond in her hair and I felt relieved - if Mildred was using my shampoo that meant it hadn't been sold on River Road yet. I wondered if Grace's father had searched their rooms.

After dinner I found him at the front desk. "I have not yet found your special hair soap," he told me,

I waited for him to say more but he just looked at me seriously.

Then I asked him, "But, you've been looking?"

"Yes," he said. "I will soon find it."

I hesitated. "I wouldn't really care, but the thing is, this shampoo, this hair soap, it was really good shampoo. I mean, even in America it was good shampoo."
“Yes,” he said, as if it made perfect sense to him that my hair required some special American product. “I will find it.”

I laughed then, because I didn’t want to sound so serious. “Well, don’t worry about it. It doesn’t really matter. But if you can find it that would be really great.”

I couldn’t sleep that night. I kept thinking about Paul and Grace and Mildred and Elizabeth and Grace’s father and my shampoo until I ended up just thinking about Paul. I thought about how, when I had told him my story, he hadn’t told me anything about himself. I hadn’t really wondered about it because I had met other Westerner travelers like him and so I already knew his type well enough to figure out his general story: he was probably doing some kind of export business, but not very seriously, because it was really only an excuse for him to be here in Africa so that he could act superior.

I also thought about how quick he had been to blame Mildred and Elizabeth, how he had warned me not to trust them, and how he had watched me try to smell Mildred’s hair, and what occurred to me was that he would love nothing more than for me to find out that they had stolen my shampoo. Maybe he had actually told them something to get them to take my shampoo. Or maybe he had even taken it himself and given it to them. Maybe, when they first got it, they hadn’t even known it was mine, although they must know by now. Whatever the details of how it happened were, the more I thought about it, the more it became obvious that he had to have been involved in some way.

The next morning Elizabeth passed me in the yard on her way to the shower, carrying a bottle of the same brand of “modern” shampoo that I had just bought. She held it out in front of her, as if she wanted me to see it, to see that she
was using another shampoo. It made sense, of course, that if they had my shampoo they would put it in another bottle. They must have poured their shampoo into my bottle and then sold it, while keeping my shampoo in their bottle to use for themselves. And if my shampoo was in this other shampoo bottle, Grace’s father would never find it.

That morning, some of the African men came and went from Mildred and Elizabeth’s room, doing business as they had been doing since they got here. It was already just after noon when Elizabeth asked me to come and see the dress she thought I would like.

In their room there was a suitcase full of men’s underwear in the middle of the floor. Mildred wasn’t there. The shampoo bottle with the picture of the straight haired black woman was on the window ledge.

“I just went looking around the market today,” I told Elizabeth even though I hadn’t left the lodge. I was surprised to hear myself lie.

“How has your day been?”

“Today has been fine,” she said. “We are just getting ready to go back to Tanzania.”

I sat on the bed that must have been Mildred’s bed – the one next to the window ledge where the shampoo was. What I thought of doing was picking the shampoo up, opening it and smelling it.

“I will show you my photograph,” Elizabeth said and she turned around, bent down, and looked through a suitcase. I hadn’t thought of doing this even a second before I did it, but when she turned around, I slipped the shampoo into my bag. It would be better this way – with no confrontation. When their shampoo bottle was gone they would know I knew they had my shampoo, but we would never have to say anything about it. Because I wasn’t mad, and I definitely didn’t hold it against them. I was glad that they had maybe been able to get some
money for the bottle. And if it were almost anything else I wouldn’t have even really cared. But I did need this shampoo back.

Elizabeth turned around and handed me her picture. She was wearing a traditional dress with big puffy sleeves and a ruffle at her hips. She looked serious for the camera.

“You look very beautiful,” I said.

Then, as I sat there with the shampoo in my bag, she showed me the dress she thought I would like. It was red, with black stripes and shoulder pads. I told her I couldn’t buy any new clothes right now.

Back in my room I closed and locked the door before I unscrewed the top. When I looked inside, I was surprised that the shampoo was bright green, not creamy white like my shampoo had been. My first thought was that the chemicals from the residue of the other shampoo must have been so toxic that they had turned my shampoo green. Then I just sat there for a few minutes, as I had done when my shampoo was first gone. This shampoo did actually also have a sort-of almond smell, in a sweet chemically way. The two shampoos did smell sort-of the same. I sat there until I felt as if someone were watching me, even though the door was closed.

Once I got up I moved quickly. I screwed the cap back on the shampoo and wrapped my towel around it. Then I took everything out of my backpack and put the towel, with the shampoo in it, at the very bottom. I stuffed everything else in on top, clipped it shut, and went to pay my bill.

When I passed through the main room to the lobby I remember noticing the wires that led nowhere, sticking out of the TV. I didn’t look at Paul, but I saw him, out of the corner of my eye, sitting in his usual place. Grace’s father looked surprised, actually alarmed, to see me with my backpack on.
“Didn’t I tell you I was leaving?” I said.

He didn’t say anything, but a look of defeat, as if he had failed to impress me, fell over his face.

“Thank you very much for everything,” I said. “Everything was very nice.”

I put the money I owed on the desk right as Paul came in. He was smiling of course. “I didn’t know you were leaving so soon,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

I hesitated because I didn’t know. “To the bus station,” I said.

He kept smiling and looked at me a little more closely. He could see something was wrong. Then Elizabeth came in. She looked at me strangely too – I had just been talking to her fifteen minutes ago and had said nothing about leaving. Of course there was no reason to be worried. She probably wouldn’t have noticed Mildred’s shampoo was missing yet, and even if she had, I knew that Mildred’s shampoo being missing wouldn’t be cause enough to search my things. A number of the African men had come and gone from their room that morning and so later, when they realized that the shampoo was gone, I would be the last one they suspected, but I still felt panicked to get out of there.

“To the bus station?” Paul asked. There was something different about him. I fumbled with a strap of my backpack as I realized that what it was that, for the first time, he looked happy.

“Yeah to the bus station.” I felt more panicked as I heard myself making no sense. “And then I’m going to leave from there.”

“So you’re going to leave from the bus station?” He paused for a second “On a bus?” He looked so amused with my nervousness that for a second I thought that he knew everything. I thought that he had set up the whole situation, and that he actually had made me steal their shampoo. It was a relief because, for that second, I had a way to understand what I had done.
As I tried to think of a destination to tell Paul I was going to, Grace’s father was looking all around the room, as though he were trying to spot just exactly what had gone wrong to make me leave so abruptly.

I couldn’t think of anywhere to say I was going. My mind was blank. Then it occurred to me that I could just leave without telling him where I was going. “Yeah,” I said, “I’m going to the bus station and I’m leaving on a bus.” I looked at Elizabeth, “Say goodbye to Mildred for me. Tell her I’ll see her when I come back to Nairobi.” I could see she didn’t believe me. I suddenly remembered the invitation to the village and realized that now I would never go there.

When I turned and walked out of the office, I almost expected them all to follow me out, but they didn’t.

As I walked though the yard, I looked into the shadows of the vines and I just about tripped, and then I was frozen when I saw that there were eyes in the leaves looking out at me.

I stepped closer, and I saw blue and yellow, covered in the shadows of the leaves. I couldn’t say how long it was, in seconds or minutes, before I realized that it was Grace, in her school uniform. She must have heard me leaving without saying good-bye to her, and climbed the tree to watch me go.

“Good-bye,” I said to her, but she just looked at me. I stood there for a minute, and then I said good-bye again. She still didn’t answer and so I walked out of the yard.

When I got to the street I turned around and she was still watching.