

Strip Poker

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BROWN SKIN
BOOKS



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THE FIRST TIME I played strip poker, it wasn't poker at all, it was gin rummy, and it wasn't in London, it was in Africa. I was sitting cross-legged behind one of the acorn-shaped huts with my top off, the slight breeze from the Nuba Mountains making the nipples of my full breasts hard, and Simon was pretty sure I was collecting nines. Didn't matter to me because I wasn't, and I considered myself ahead in the game. After all, he was sitting there in only his tank top, having boldly taken off his shorts first and letting me have a look at his engorged cock, blushing pink at me. As I picked up a card from the deck, he cupped one of my tits and began massaging it, and I told him, 'Not fair.'

'Hey, I'm losing,' he protested.

I flashed a smile at him and arched my eyebrows, saying, 'You could have started with your shirt.'

'Where would the fun be in that?' he replied and offered me a wide grin.

He was good looking for a white English man. No weak jaw or poor teeth or sallow skin. No, he had diamond chip blue eyes and soft, almost feminine, curves to his jaw and high cheekbones, a curl of his blond hair falling across his forehead and giving him a boyish look. I hadn't seen the rest of him yet, but the package so far delivered, the girth on him thick, and I had already begun making a circle with my forefinger and thumb to rub him a little, making him harder. I liked Simon. Maybe I wouldn't give him a second glance back home, but we were here, mildly attracted to each other and we were both bored. The good thing was he couldn't play cards for shit.

After my turn, he announced 'Gin! There!'

Of course, he could have been hustling me.

'Get them off, Teresa, come on,' he laughed, and then an instinctive reflex made him swivel his head around to check if we were being watched.

I doubted anyone would give a damn if they had seen us, although they might have paused in curiosity over his body. Not mine. We were with the Nuba, and while I had come into the Sudan on a British passport with my British name, I was a descendant of these people. They're known for being tall, and I'm about five foot eight, and my complexion is their same dark brown. When I look in a mirror, I recognise one of their flat noses, my face only a little rounder than theirs. While people in the villages of the mountains wore a mixture of Western and native clothing, it wasn't uncommon to see men and

women walking around completely nude. So no one would give us more than a second glance. I was the one who stared when I first arrived, watching half-naked Nuba, their heads decorated with white ash, loincloths around their waists, perform the traditional Bokhsa dance—and wearing knock-off Ray Ban sunglasses.

Simon had made me laugh because he confessed to ‘feeling bloody physically inadequate next to these guys’. Nuba men, after all, can stand over six feet and have impressive physiques. It was really something to watch two of these fellows, naked, covered in white ash and looking like adverts for a gym membership, crouch in front of each other and then grapple in traditional wrestling. Simon had a go, and we had a good laugh because he was on his back in seconds.

Now he looked at me, cat smiling after it swallowed the canary, and he waited. I smiled back and rose to my feet, deciding to give him a bonus. I slipped off my panties along with my skirt and stood nude in front of him like an offering. My fingers dug through the pleasantly soft thatch of his blond hair as he got on his knees, as if my body was a temple to him, and then I felt his warm, wet tongue begin these exquisite laps on my pussy. I shuddered involuntarily. His hands were fondling the cheeks of my ass, applying their tender pressure to urge me to open my legs a bit so that his tongue, his beautiful tongue, could probe and explore me further. His lips found my clit and *sucked*, and my knees actually buckled.

‘Maybe we’d better get inside,’ he suggested.

I nodded, forgetting to breathe. At least I had the presence of mind to say, ‘You’d better have some latex to go with all the aces you threw down.’

Yes, yes, he said in a mildly hurt voice, wondering how I could suspect him of being anything but responsible.

It was a hell of a place for a tryst. We had slipped away from the *Sibar*—one of the festivals—but from the open doorway we could look out from the darkness of the hut and still see what was going on. Men and women kept dancing with their arms over their heads, their feet shuffling in circles. The traditional priests, the *kujur*, blessed the cattle. As people laughed and enjoyed themselves, you occasionally heard the *clack, clack, clack* of mock stick fighting.

The on-and-off-and-on-again war felt very far away, at least for now.

I’m home, but I am not home, went the chant in my head again as I rolled onto my back in the dust, and lifted my knees. Simon’s well-defined white chest loomed over me, one hand bracing his weight against the earth as the other cupped my breast, and our tongues sloshed together in a wet, luxurious

kiss as I felt the tiny red dome of his penis nudge my pussy lips, asking for entry. As I felt his girth fill me, sink into me, and my vaginal muscles spasm with a contraction, my arm hugged his back tightly, and his face was in my shoulder-length hair. I looked at the play of colour of our bodies, our own little Tao symbol, and my mind was distracted momentarily by my choice. Part of me would have liked to have got busy with one of those muscular village men, one of my own kind, but I was practically one step from Martian to them with my British ways, my Western brashness. To be with one of them implied involvement. Simon knew this for what it was. A casual lay over a card game.

‘Christ, you are so gorgeous,’ he whispered, and thrust harder inside me. I matched his rhythm with my hips, and we were a perfect fit, perfectly in tune. I was sucking hard on his chest, leaving purple welts to brand him with my mouth, and he took this as encouragement to pump harder. When I looked down at myself I saw this slick white cock pulling out and ramming back into me with a furious will, disappearing under the tufts of my black pubic hair sprayed with beads of our perspiration. We heard a *clack-clack* of stick fighting again and laughed together, heard the dancing and thought we were being quite mischievous. The two of us off like this while the village went on with its celebration. It was as if we were inside this great pageant, invisible, surrounded by the voices and the low thuds of feet in the dust, and it enveloped us. He didn’t have to say a word, we were already moving together, Simon pulling out of me, and me getting on all fours. And as I felt him enter me again, the fullness of him and then his narrow hips against my buttocks, one of his hands cupped my swaying tit as he started a new rhythm. As shadows, we looked out through the keyhole doorway of the hut onto the Nuba people, my people yards away. There were two broad-shouldered naked men making their sticks collide.

‘Uhhh... uhhh... uhhh... Give it to me.’

Clack, clack. Clack, clack.

I felt Simon pound away, and as one of the combatants up ahead turned, the sun hit him and perfectly outlined all the muscles of his chest, his cock limp but still impressively long, and the young man smiled at his friend with a flash of teeth and great camaraderie. There was such beauty in him, such a noble grace and something more. Something I couldn’t define that instinctively hit me in my core, and my legs were trembling and the electric shock of my orgasm began. I heard myself in my little-girl whine, muttering, ‘Yes, fuck me, come on, fuck me...’ And to be honest, part of me had disconnected, feeling myself come but not caring whether it was Simon at all, wishing irrationally the tall young nude out there would drop his stick and come see me.

Just look at me with my dangling full breasts and my mouth so wide open in ecstasy I could barely contain my scream. It was the first time I recognised I'd enjoy being watched. But I knew I'd feel a bit choosy over my voyeurs.

Be careful what you wish for.



Khartoum. Dusty. Dirty. Desert. Yecchh. Creeps at the airport who glared at me and then at the photo in my passport. In the land of *sharia*, strict, Islamic law, my Destiny's Child CD and my Sony Discman were summarily confiscated.

I am home, but I am not home. That was the mantra that had gone through my head ever since my plane had touched down in the capital. Dad had warned me in a sing song voice, peering at his book in his big overstuffed chair in the old house in Oxford, 'You'll be disappointed...' He had done the trip himself years ago. 'You won't get bitter, just ambivalent.' Whatever the hell that meant.

And so I tried to keep an open mind towards the Acropole Hotel, the looming mosques, the dust storms and ugly government buildings that squatted by the Blue Nile, the grimacing men in their skull caps, selling melons. In the constant stream of Arabic that washed over you in the streets, you kept hearing the word *abid*. It means slave. It's an insult.

I am home, but I am not home, I thought. The regime in the Arabic Muslim north has been and still is doing its best to systematically exterminate the Nuba and most of the other black peoples in the rich southern half of the country. I can remember sitting on the floor in front of the television at home years ago when the BBC did a documentary on the Old Country and interviewed the governor of Kordofan. 'From the Islamic point of view, Nuba culture is very ugly and must be eradicated.' Hey, Mom, Dad, did I hear what I think I just heard?

Sometimes back in Soho cafés, earnest young white liberals would suggest to me that Africa was one big, black Balkans, and I would lose my patience. *No*. Sorry. There are no 'grey areas' for dissection or dissembling. We're talking removal of magistrates, the slow starvation of supplies and funds from schools, making sure anyone from the wrong ethnic group doesn't get an appointment in the Darfur region. Slavery. Massacres. Oh, and by the way, the big American and European oil companies—Chevron, Total, Orpheocon—used to hire out the government's Arab tribe militias, the Murahaliin, when the Nuba or anyone else interfered with their concession surveys and drilling.

I sure know how to pick a place for a vacation.

I came to meet my grandfather. Since he inconveniently died before I was born, and Dad was never quite sure or forthcoming on how the family would

up in the Land That The Sun Forgot, I would meet my grandfather in his mountains and huts. In the *Sibar*, and okay, yeah, in the shadow of the refugee camps. A British-African girl who normally couldn't live without her fix of the bookshops along Tottenham Court Road and enjoyed trashy American TV on Sky. And here I was in a region the size of Scotland where human misery occasionally kept a lease with an option to buy.

These mountains had divided the Nuba up into dozens of different ethnic groups with their own little idiosyncrasies and languages, with Arabic being the lingua franca whether you liked that or not. I chose to play tourist in a region that the government had left alone for a long while, but if you drove twenty miles to the north and stopped at the ring of thorn fences around the swelling refugee camps, the white folks from CARE and Oxfam and VSO told you that it was only a matter of time. Orpheocon wanted to resume its geological survey in the area. Oil meant trouble.

Simon was one of those white aid workers who liked to drift into the Nuba villages. 'Every so often, it's nice to take a break and see *happy* people.'

Even if it was temporary. With his boyish long face, he was like a young non-gay T.E. Lawrence. He had the look. Fortunately he didn't have any Lawrence-like romantic illusions about where he was, or if he once had, he'd ditched them.

The other white aid workers I met in Kadugli or elsewhere, always in fading concert T-shirts and khaki trousers, pissed me off with their condescension. 'The SPLA are bastards same as the others. Name me someone who actually wants to help these people *selflessly*...' You passed café tables in Khartoum where you heard the Africans were lazy, that they wouldn't accept sensible advice, that they couldn't be *taught*—

With refreshing candour, Simon granted the point that he was here as much for himself as for any impulse to save his fellow man. More, in fact.

'Sure, we get something out of it,' he laughed. 'All these bright young things with their Masters in International Development—they'll be milking their war stories for years!'

Yes, he wanted thrills. Yes, he found his middle class life in Purley crushingly vapid and his pre-Med studies disillusioning. Desperate to confirm a vague intuition that he could heal, he had signed up for shit pay and grim working conditions so that he could inoculate African children against tetanus, meningitis and polio.

His blond hair and his Jude Law looks made his tactless humour and his flippant attitude easier to take. He had a habit of strolling around, singing

Bruce Cockburn songs. ‘Lovers in a Dangerous Time’ and his particular favourite, a blistering lefty political tune that had the lyrics, ‘If I had a rocket launcher, some sonofabitch would die’. He giggled over that one as if we were supposed to treat the lyrics as ironic.

I know he worked hard, but you’d swear he came off like a slacker from the way he spoke. Like many of the aid workers, he was full of anachronistic talents that he had abandoned in the First World. For instance, he was a brilliant artist—so skilled as a teenager that Disney’s animation studios had actually offered him a contract. He turned them down.

‘Are you kidding? Why didn’t you take it? You could be out in sunny California! Hollywood!’

‘Yeah, I could!’ he said, mimicking my enthusiasm. ‘Drawing Dumbo II and becoming an alcoholic!’

I remember after we made love, we quickly washed and changed, but we were still bored, so he laughed and suggested Strip Chess. I rolled my eyes. How about garden-variety chess for now and Strip Chess later? He had a board in his car. When I came with him to fetch it, I noticed the butt of a rifle sticking out of the back of the Jeep.

‘What’s that?’ I asked nervously.

He responded as if I’d asked him about a species of bird. ‘Oh. That’s a Kalashnikov.’

‘Uh-huh. And, uh, what are you doing with it?’

‘I don’t have a big dog,’ answered Simon. ‘And I doubt it would help with the militias.’

‘Simon, I can’t believe you keep that thing with you! Surely you’ll lose your job if the agency knows you’ve got it!’

‘And wouldn’t that be a real catastrophe?’ he laughed. ‘I’d lose my precious token salary of £50 a month and have to go back to Uni! Teresa, please don’t tell me “give peace a chance”. I don’t think I can handle it, darling.’

‘No, but...’

I let it drop.



It was a couple of days later when I woke up to find many of the Nuba in the village packing up and heading northwest. In my bad Arabic with its atrocious accent, I was able to talk to one of the shopkeepers and learn that the people feared an imminent attack by Muslim guerrillas. I was packing when Simon found me in a hut and said, ‘There’s not going to be an attack *as such*. More like an encroachment—of oil workers.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s the Orpheocon concession survey,’ he explained. ‘Come on, a bunch of us are going to go take a look.’

‘Wait a minute, wait a minute! Are you crazy? What if there *are* guerrillas in the area?’

He shrugged. ‘Then we drive like hell. Away. It’ll be all right, we’ll be careful.’

To this very day, I have no idea why I took leave of my senses and actually got in the Jeep beside him. Riding shotgun so to speak. There were a couple of young Nuba men in the back, friends of Simon, and they accompanied us half out of curiosity and half out of duty to the elders in the village who wanted some kind of reconnaissance done. More of the Nuba were in a Range Rover driving behind us. If these men had to leave their homes, they wanted to know whether their panic over a rumour was justified.

Driving through the beautiful forested hills, thinking how some countries are better at breaking your heart than men. But I didn’t really notice the landscape because I was too busy chanting to myself *what are you doing, what are you doing, what are you doing*—

Twenty miles, and the Jeep and the Range Rover drove up to five rifles trained on us, not much of a guerrilla band but I suspected it would be enough. The Murahaliin stood with a single white man. Silver hair, pasty complexion, white shirt and tan trousers and, Jesus, desert boots. He even had one of those geeky mechanical pencil holders in his shirt pocket. He stepped forward and gestured to the Arabs to lower their rifles.

‘Whoa, ho, ho! There’s no need for that.’

He saw a white man driving the vehicle and assumed we posed no threat. Beside his motley group of Murahaliin bodyguards, I noticed one of those surveying things on a tripod, plenty of maps weighed down on the ground by a backpack and a thermos. The Humvee in which he and his men drove out here had the yellow Orpheocon logo on its doors. When he spoke to us, I heard a British accent.

‘You’re trespassing, you know,’ he warned us with a cheerful smile. ‘It’s a bloody good thing I wasn’t staring out at the hills, otherwise these boys would have shot you.’

‘Isn’t it just?’ replied Simon sarcastically. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t be interested to know that a whole village has packed up and is on the road because they heard you were dropping by?’

The oil executive looked at him blankly. ‘What village?’ Thinking better of it, he said, ‘Look, Mr...? Let me guess? UNICEF? Christian Aid? Well, whoever you are, I’m not interested in politics. If these people you’re talking about are on concession land then I can’t say I feel terribly sorry for them. Well and good that they go! And if they’re not, then I can hardly be expected to express concern over something that is outside our corporate responsibilities.’

‘This guy was out when they had the public relations course,’ I whispered.

Simon glanced at me, his face reflecting my own loathing for the man. He stood up in the Jeep, leaned his elbows on the windshield. Doing his best to keep a lid on his simmering indignation.

‘Right. We’ll try a different tack. Could you at least tell me, since *you’re* here, whether we can expect more Murahaliin swooping in for your “protection”?’

The Orpheocon man thought this was a scream. Chuckling away, he said, ‘You know it occurs to me that if I say yes, there are more on their way, I’m doing your precious villagers a favour, aren’t I? They’re packed already, I suppose.’

I tugged on Simon’s arm. ‘Let’s just get out of here and join the convoy.’

‘In a minute,’ said Simon.

He gestured to one of his friends sitting behind me in the Jeep to hand him the old, rusting Kalashnikov rifle. I watched Simon raise the machine gun with nonchalant grace, and before anyone could do anything, there was a jackhammer rumble that was deafening, and an angry red blotch erupted in the chest of the Orpheocon executive. He didn’t die like in the movies—he merely fell in a lifeless heap in the dirt.

I panicked and foolishly grabbed at the rifle, my hand pulling back with my mild yelp from the still hot muzzle.

‘*Are you insane?*’ I yelled. ‘*What the hell are you doing?*’

Under my voice, I could hear rifles being cocked on *both* sides. I hadn’t seen the guns Simon’s pals had brought along. I hadn’t a clue that the Nuba in the Range Rover had come armed as well.

A Mexican stand-off, African style.

The Arabs faced us with better American weapons, but there were more Nuba with more guns, and if things got worse they were going to lose this bout. And all I could think was: Jesus, Simon’s killed us. Whoever wins, those Arabs will pick us off first.

‘Why did you do that?’ I demanded.

But Simon ignored me. He jumped out of the car and brandished the rifle at the Murahaliin, telling them in Arabic, ‘You go back now and tell your bosses at the company their concession out here has been revoked!’

I followed him out of the Jeep, but I didn't know what to do.

The Murahaliin said nothing. After a moment in which I thought my heart was going to beat its way out of my chest, the Arabs turned with their sour faces, muttering '*abid*' and jumped into the Humvee. Simon was already returning to the Jeep. I grabbed his arm.

'What was that?'

'That was the answer,' he shot back, his voice angry. His blood was up just as much as mine. 'That was surgery.'

'That was incredibly stupid,' I snapped. 'Shit, you murdered him!'

'Come on, Teresa. You're the last person I would expect to complain! For Christ's sake, Orpheocon hires the Murahaliin. Chevron used to hire the Murahaliin! You had Total over here for the French doing—'

'I know the facts,' I cut in. 'And what you just did makes you one more white man thinking he can solve our fucking problems! For God's sake, Simon, can't you see there's going to be a massive reprisal for this? We could have just sent him on his way! We could have driven them off, we—'

'So I went one better.'

'What is this?' I demanded. 'You want to feel good about yourself with that soldier of fortune shit? Did you get your rocks off?'

'I removed one of the bloodsuckers,' he replied. 'Maybe if we shoot enough of them, the companies will back out of their concessions, and the regime will have to think twice.'

'Doubtful,' I muttered.

There seemed little point in arguing any more. I was the only one standing by the side of the car, holding everyone up. I took my old spot on the passenger side, and Simon drove us back to the safe territory.

I could never look at him the same way again. Not because I thought killing the oil executive was necessarily wrong. He was a bastard profiteer who thought he was invulnerable, immune from the ravages the Khartoum regime and his company inflicted here. He was mistaken. But Simon had shot him down without hesitation and so ruthlessly that I saw now he was capable of practically anything.

And I questioned his motives. I had thought he had 'matured' past the usual White Man's Burden nonsense that 'well-intentioned' aid workers came over with, having their little relief-work martyrdom, getting their kicks over exotica and then heading home. I thought he was struggling towards finding a role where he could be useful. And now I saw I was mistaken. He was a shopper like all the others, and he'd merely been looking for something different.

I stayed with the Nuba for a couple of months after that episode and gradually made my way back into the north, taking a flight home to London. Mutual friends who visited Sudan told me Simon did a complete amateur mercenary gig with the rebel SPLA for a little while, and then he, too, fled the country, sneaking across the Ethiopian border and having the cheek to walk into a British consulate to ask for help. I suspect his vanity got a mild thrill out of all the rumours and stories circulating about him, but he dropped off my personal radar.

And, come to think of it, I didn't play cards again with anyone for three years.