

Parts of Darkness

Calculus 12, Veritas Prep.

It is July, 2015. Five years after your senior trip—one of the happiest events in your life—you have reunited with Mr. Fink for another adventure. After a series of phone calls, vaccinations, and plane flights, you now find yourself alone in deepest, darkest Africa with your 12th grade Humane Letters teacher. But this is no jet-setter’s safari. Rather, Mr. Fink has recruited you to participate in an expedition of utmost importance: the search for his long-lost brother, Winfred.

It all began last spring when Mr. Fink gave you a call, telling you he was in town and curious to hear about your life as an unemployed philosophy major. The two of you met in your unheated Baltimore apartment and discussed Dostoevsky for hours. You sat beneath a flickering 60-watt bulb, talking until your coffee began to taste like the black grime at the edges of streets at the end of winter, the salty gazpacho of motor oil, ice, and crumpled-up ATM receipts. At some point Fink brought up his older brother. Winfred J. Fink, as you never knew, was a brilliant scholar who had received his Ph.D. from Columbia at twenty-six and had gone on to become the William Rainey Harper Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Chicago. But fifteen years earlier, he had set out to study the M’bunga tribe in the Congolese jungle, and had not been seen since.

“For years, we thought he was dead,” Fink said. “But then one of his graduate students at Chicago received a package in the mail. It was covered in dozens of stamps, with an address handwritten and half-illegible, and a customs declaration indicating it had been sent from central Africa. When the student opened it, there was nothing but a thick stack of rotting banana leaves. He recoiled from the stench. For a moment he was baffled, but when he looked closer, he could see on the surface of the leaves a series of fine red lines, like xylem. He realized that the red lines were not some feature of the leaves—they were words and sentences. Written in blood. What he had, the graduate student realized, was the first chapter of the book that would end up revolutionizing anthropology—Winfred J. Fink’s *Manifesting Archaeonics: The M’bunga of the Congo*.”

“I’ve heard of that!,” you said. “I remember reading about it in the *Birmingham Book Review*. But I had no idea it was your brother.”

Fink took another sip of coffee and grunted. “It took years before we had the entire manuscript. Chapters would arrive irregularly—sometimes we would get two chapters in a week, other times a year would go between packages. Sometimes they’d be addressed to one of his graduate students, sometimes they’d be addressed to me. Once I got a call from an ex-wife of his. I had to convince her that this pile of stinking banana leaves was valuable and not a violation of their restraining order. He wrote in a bizarre shorthand. Sometimes the leaves would be rotted beyond recognition and we had to edit around them.” He shook his head.

That was three months ago. Your memory of that chilly night runs through your mind as you swim against the current of the Oubangui river, struggling to not be swept over the waterfall just a few feet downstream. Fink is standing on the bank, paralyzed in terror. This is not what either of you had expected. Were you not preoccupied with survival, you might recognize him mouthing the words, “The horror. The horror.”

What Fink had told you that night in Baltimore was that his brother’s book had been awarded the Levi-Struass Prize—the highest honor of the American Anthropological Association—and though no one had heard anything from the professor since he had sent the final chapter of *Manifesting*, the head of the AAA had charged Fink with assembling a team to recall his brother to the States to receive his award. He needed someone fluent in both calculus and post-colonial theory. You signed on immediately. Fink then flew to the South Side of Chicago, where he rallied together his brother’s remaining graduate students. They had been haunting the gothic towers of the University of Chicago, marooned without an advisor for more than a decade. They were ghosts in the academic doldrums. They were a scraggly bunch—literally, since none of them seemed to have cut their hair or otherwise engaged in personal hygiene since their advisor’s disappearance.

And now they were dead. All of them. One had succumbed to the busy third-world traffic in Kinshasa, another had been swallowed whole by a crocodile while visiting the zoo before entering the jungle, and

another had been beheaded by a savage local warlord whom you refused to bribe. “Our expedition is funded by a National Science Foundation grant,” you had told the warlord, “and the grant rules explicitly forbid graft.” So for the last two weeks, it has just been you and Fink, with the forest canopy closing in on all sides, canoeing up the narrowing river into what seemed to be an impenetrable heart of darkness.

The river had, at first, been teeming with boats and business, like something out of a *National Geographic* feature on overpopulation, but quickly it had turned silent. You hadn’t seen anyone else for ten days. There was no sound of insects or birds—and, come to think of it, you hadn’t once needed to use the mosquito netting you had packed. There were no monkeys jumping from tree to tree. *It is*, you mused thoughtfully in your journal, *as if the white noise of the wilderness has been muted by some cosmic volume control.*

Eventually, you came to a huge waterfall, and Fink, using his prowess as a navigator found a portage around it. It was a steep, rocky path that switchbladed up an escarpment, and Fink bounded ahead, leaving you to carry the 70-pound dugout canoe on your shoulders.

“It should only be a few more miles after we put back in,” he said. “That ex-girlfriend of his said—” A branch snapped and a yellow blur bounced onto the path. You lost your balance and the canoe slipped and swung off and into a tree, and you slipped and gashed your knee on a rock in the path. The blur was gone. You clutched your knee. All you could hear was the clatter of Fink’s solar-powered espresso maker as it fell down the trail into the jungle. Fink had dropped it in fright. “That was a mountain lion,” he said. You felt the blood seep between your fingers. You looked up. “You mean a leopard.”

“No, that was a mountain lion. It had the dull coloring, oversized hind legs, and long tail of a mountain lion.” For the first time Mr. Fink began to look concerned. “Mountain lions don’t live outside of North America.”

“At least it’s something,” you said. “It’s the first animal we’ve seen on the entire voyage.”

You bandaged your knee and Fink carried the canoe for the rest of the portage. You limped behind him. The jungle was silent again. At a safe distance above the falls, you put back in. You were loading your weatherproof copy of the *Oxford English Dictionary* into the canoe, trying to put as little weight on your bad knee as possible, when you stepped onto an algae-covered rock and slipped and fell into the flume. Immediately the current swept you into the center of the river and out of Fink’s saving grasp.

You’ve lost the OED. But you might yet save yourself. 65 meters ahead of you is a large rock—if you could make it to the rock, you’d survive. You know that, at top speed, you can swim a Phelpsian two meters per second—but you’re pretty out of shape, and last time you were in the pool, you were swimming only one meter per second after ten minutes (600 seconds) of swimming. (Assume your speed decreases exponentially, i.e., that the rate at which your velocity changes is proportional to velocity itself.) The river has a current of about 1.5 meters per second. The waterfall is only 100 meters (about two Olympic laps) behind you. **Do you survive?**