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The Strudel Defense

In the moments and (moreover) two decades before his mobile sputtered on the metal desktop, Stanley Keenan had considered himself entrenched in a respected life of purpose. To wit, the phone call interrupted a presentation to the leaders of twenty local NGOs—Stanley’s “KNOW THE 6 DANGER SIGNS” sliding across the screen to the sound effect of a car crash—as he enlightened them to the somewhat counterintuitive reality that when the military declared a road to be cleared of mines, it did not in fact guarantee there were no mines on the road. In that regard, the military employed a more expedient standard in dealing with those buried evils than humanitarians, meaning that a certain degree of operational efficiency outweighed the grisly cost of tactical imperfection. His own dozen years on either side of the civil-military divide taught him well the disparity between probing thin metal rods into every square meter of ground versus every square foot, not to mention the way those years also taught him to appreciate the donning of protective armor under a blistering tropical sun, as it kept his waist not trim, but at least subject to the camouflage of a loose shirt.

The caller summoned Stanley to the office of the DSR, a career diplomat who in volume and temperament rather effortlessly shouldered the acronym embossed in copper plate across his door. Three minutes later, Stanley heard from the Deputy Special Representative of the (United Nations) Secretary General that his girlfriend of the previous five weeks was in fact truly a *girlfriend*, as in sixteen years old, and Stanley was therefore in flagrant violation of not only Sierra Leonean law and UN regulations, but of *any sense of moral decency*, as the DSR emphasized with his block of a head appearing to crane forward and hulk just inches above Stanley’s staggered face.

Stanley’s ruddy complexion froze to a shade of gunmetal gray. The chill of the air conditioning, at first so welcome—Stanley’s having bound up three muggy flights of stairs to hear (he’d figured) news of a mine accident—now infiltrated his bones, making them feel brittle as icicles.

He might have attempted to explain that he'd been trying to break it off with Addi, and in fact already knew that she wasn't old enough, were it not for that final implication. Old enough for what? For what had left him grinning at the ceiling that very morning.

The week before, Stanley had checked Addi's ID card and confirmed the unsurprising news. He then attempted and failed 20 or maybe 500 times to finish a conversation that left her clinging tearfully around his neck, impossible for him to peel more than one limb at a time from its defiant grip had he even earnestly tried. And regardless of the gravity of the charges, Stanley wasn't prepared to deny the facts, he reassured himself, because Keenans weren't the sort of people who denied facts or shied from responsibility, especially given his doubts that any explanation could have countered the dossier of evidence pressed to the desk by the DSR's doughy and well-manicured fingers. A steeled technician yet a tremble-throated speaker, Stanley collapsed against the hard wood of the chair, dud arguments tailing off as soon as they came to mind, his brain instead rather unhelpfully taking note of the DSR's crisp pinstripe suit, a sharp contrast from his own everyman's outfit—pressed cargo pants and a blue button-down underneath a multi-pocketed vest, its UN insignia jutting forward over a pack of Salems.

The *strudel defense* emerged spontaneously (and hopefully) enough with a proclamation of good character. "I've worked six missions with the UN—ten years—and there's not a single blemish on that record," he said, the fine tip of the DSR's pen scratching notes onto a pad. Stanley briefly described the more distinguished accomplishments: 750 miles of roadway cleared in Angola, thousands of deminers trained in Cambodia, steady promotions. "I may have chanced one drink too many on the rare occasion—you won't find many people willing to dig up live ordnance who don't relish an infrequent scotch or two..." A dog-eared joke of the trade at which the DSR failed to laugh or chortle or furnish even the smallest hint of human smile that Stanley could have embraced as acknowledgement, or perhaps even sympathy towards this dutiful UN employee whose inner sense of dread cut the last iron from his voice. "But, sir, never any wrongdoing."

He waited, pressing his spine sharply against the wood, then jumped into the mounting silence by urging the DSR to see that on occasion

good people do one tiny unwise thing that leads to one other tiny unwise thing and pretty soon one spectacularly foolish thing coalesces right in the center of their lives. “It’s like the Germans during World War II,” he added, “not Eichmann or Goebbels or that lot, but the normal ones, like your railroad engineers who drove the death trains or your Sachsen grandmother rolling out strudel dough today, but who once worked as a lab clerk at Buchenwald.” In all its glory: *the strudel defense*. He placed his hands under his thighs and tried to look sympathetic.

The DSR exhaled, whether in reflection, disbelief, or annoyance, Stanley could not tell. “You’ve been briefed, of course, that the UN now implements a zero tolerance policy regarding sexual exploitation.”

“Yes sir, I have. It’s just—”

“I have no choice in this matter. The UN is committed to zealous enforcement of the policy.” The DSR dug quite deeply into the z. Stanley’s stomach clutched as the DSR terminated the meeting by swiveling his high-backed chair 180 degrees and reaching for his phone.

Right hand cupping the banister and descending slowly, each step brought him closer to assembling his belongings *as quickly as possible*, following on from the DSR’s curt yet theatrical barking for his assistant to obtain a ticket from British Air, no matter how full Saturday’s plane.

Back in his office, Stanley paced the narrow length between his filing cabinet and an Afghan kilim nailed to the cinderblock wall. Regarding himself in the mirror proved tremendously (though belatedly) fruitful in terms of arguments he might better have made. Fragments of indignation pierced his gloom. What the hell had just happened? He wasn’t a Nazi. It jarred him, this notion that he’d become some sort of child molester when he’d been a card-carrying member of Amnesty International for how long? He fished the card from his wallet. There! Eighteen years. A veritable platinum membership in the fraternity of human rights.

He imagined himself lambasting the thunderstruck DSR, his imperious voice clarifying and deciding the matter: the very proposition that Addi Binta Sesay’s rights derived from some anachronistic legal definition of a child amounted to a miscarriage of logic when confronted by the full-blossomed womanhood of the person who’d slid onto the stool next to his at Paddy’s. Turquoise eye shadow perfectly matching the color of her tight leather shorts, she hadn’t simply sat down, her waist had

swayed musically as she approached, confident in Stanley's inability to remove his eyes or restrain his increased flow of blood.

"I'm Addi," she had said, holding their handshake far longer than necessary.

"Hi, I'm Stan Keenan." The words tripped out as if he needed practice.

"Hello Stan. Tell me, what are you up to here in Sierra Leone?"

All during his answer he'd found himself riveted to the hollow of her cheeks and the O of her mouth as she tugged the last bit of guava juice through her straw. He could still see it; the way all of this ripeness rather massively outstripped any notion of childhood based on D.O.B., western universalist dogma, or the need for bureaucratic clarity.

This mental tirade succumbed to reality as he talked through his predicament aloud, or very nearly aloud, or in fact whispered it to his brother-in-law over the phone, laboring to explain that the expectations of social and sexual maturity in Sierra Leone could hardly be understood by standards back home. "This isn't Elizabethan England," he said, enjoying the certitude of it, "most of your local businessmen—Christ, half of the UN's own national staff!—must have *married* 15 and 16-year-olds."

"Huh? Leanne is only fifteen."

"Precisely the point I am trying to tell you. It's different here. It's like eating rice with your hand or peeing by the side of the road. That's what's normal in Sierra Leone."

"I can see how some things are normal, Stan, but when I think of the girls, it..." Ian's voice trailed off.

"That's completely different. They're my nieces."

"But then what if they weren't?"

"I don't mean it like that. It's more like you can't compare Addi's—that's her name, Addi—mindset to your girls'." The hushed conversation stumbled on like that, Stanley making statements and nervously recanting when he realized how they played to Ian, whose children proved an explanation stopper and, ultimately, a reason for Ian to balk at Stanley's request for a place to stay when returning to England.

Clapping his phone shut, Stanley realized the futility in his desire to explain to Ian that in the oxymoron of modern Sierra Leone, nobody would have displayed one iota of ethical ambivalence over Stanley's relationship with Addi. Except, of course, for the armada of politically

correct bureaucrats inside the UN, especially those prickly shrews from the Conduct and Discipline Unit.

Exploitation? Sexual abuse? Statutory rape? Addi had waited a few beers before leaning to be heard over the pumping music. "It's very loud in here." Her lips brushed his ear and her pert breasts pressed his arm. A quake of desire reddened Stanley's face. Without the slightest anxiety he placed his hand upon her sleek thigh, well above the knee, well beyond the question of acquiescence.

"I have a balcony overlooking the water," he offered into her ear as she pressed a little closer, hip against his. The whole affair had been decided in roughly three seconds, Stanley feeling every bit the gallant prince, or if not a prince then at least the gallant repository of an exit visa in Addi's scramble for a life beyond the violence and penury of Sierra Leone.

The next morning, over breakfast eggs and sliced mango, Addi did not ask for payment, confirming Stanley's expectations and proof enough of the wrongness of the DSR's self-righteous insinuations to the contrary. Addi was no prostitute, no more than the beautiful women plying the chic clubs and A-list parties of Notting Hill or Mayfair, becoming girlfriends of wealthy men not on a transactional basis but as part of an archetypal and unspoken exchange. "Let's eat tonight at Mamba Point," Addi said, her finger winning enough of a nod from his penis to ensure Stanley's acceptance of this new arrangement in their lives.

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Upon further reflection, Stanley recognized that the impromptu deployment of what he now termed *the strudel defense* contained a certain inherent and not entirely unforeseeable defect. Precisely his problem: that this luxury of further reflection, let alone two minutes of unpressured thought, had been impossible until now, until Stanley found himself standing straddle-legged over a lumpy military-issue duffel in the stifling humidity of Freetown's Lungi International Airport. Now this further reflection rushed in various directions, retracing his horrible luck and his not having been more careful and the injustice of the DSR not taking his calls and the astonishing joy of Addi's shoulder snug to his chin.

So the deficiencies of his fumbled defense burned rather warmly, flamed by a not negligible yearning to go back in time, not only due to the inherent and not entirely unforeseeable defect of even mentioning Nazism. No, what really chafed was the particular mistake of employing the second person, as it did not seem to soften the well-consternated face of DSR Heinz Ansbloch, who showed no sign of grasping the generic use of “your” and perhaps did not appreciate Stanley’s speculation concerning the wartime activities of his own ruddy-cheeked grandmother. How bloody stupid!

Like many of the African airports he had seen over the years, there were no departure boards, no flight announcements or counters festooned with colorful airline logos, no way of knowing where to begin queuing or in which direction to proceed. Consultancy contract terminated and an erstwhile flourishing career of similar consultancy contracts just as surely terminated, Stanley wrapped thick arms round his chest and daydreamed a cycle of plastic surgery more typically associated with the lam of a mafia don. He dismissed the idea—chided himself again for the allusion to criminality—and yet his mind clutched at the prospect of identity change, had clutched at it the night before as he sleeplessly flailed for a sense of safe ground, quickened by that fantasy of a clean-cut escape.

Two ticket agents finally stepped behind a tilted counter and the scrum surged forward, shuffling past Stanley on both sides. His legs buckled, rejecting the decisiveness of movement. Or was it the finality of movement that paralyzed him? The buzzword cum standard echoed again in his mind: *zealous enforcement*. With that deep z. And in Sierra Leone of all places. The DSR must spend half the day in meetings with ex-rebel officials, men now seeking lucrative positions in the new government who were in fact bona fide, top-of-the-mark RUF war criminals. What about zealous enforcement of the notion that hacking off the arms and ears of children ranked somewhat far down the list of qualifications for public office?

The wife of a bespectacled man, losing patience with Stanley’s stasis, dragged her suitcase over his foot, capturing his attention and triggering a small explosion of memories, her hair chemically softened and painstakingly ironed flat as a Filipina’s, thus resembling lovely Addi’s favorite style, perhaps at that very moment as she expectantly rang his

buzzer, or as she later that evening collapsed onto a Paddy's barstool amid the whirlwind of expat-girlfriend gossip, the heavily amplified bass driving a rattle deep into her heart. Stanley, a man who defused bombs, had never once felt as if he might begin sobbing in public. He squeezed the images from his head, cursed and then execrated Heinz Ansbloch a few times before reviling himself over and over until there was no point in further repetition. Upon advice of the UN's lawyers, he hadn't even called her to explain.

He scanned the chaotic hall, forced himself to distraction at the pushiness of the black, black porters in their grimy blue overalls, shifting luggage from one pile to another, firebrands of indignity if not tipped for even the slightest of unsolicited help. Slouched on his bag in the emptying space, Stanley Keenan's head suddenly bobbed up at the bleak yet consoling realization that upon further reflection his strudel defense had not been so terribly inapt after all. He straightened, hefting the duffel to his shoulder. That bunion-footed grandmother humming as she baked her own grandmother's strudel, the interlaced fingers of flaky crust embracing tart cubes of apple and oozing with crystalline flows of brown sugar. Somehow, someday, all men and women will learn to forgive themselves.