

Aid Work

by Meredith Shepard

We were dirt blonde, all of us, even the guys, and it made me wonder if we'd gone into aid work because we weren't glossy and attractive enough for banking, or if the people who went into banking just cared more and dyed their hair.

"Question," the professor was saying—he was very old and famous for always wearing a polka dot bowtie. "You are doing a survey of sex workers in the coastal city of Mombasa, Kenya. You ask them what they most want or need that aid money can buy."

"Come on now, what's the answer? What do they say?"

I looked around and saw five hands go up, all of them attached to arms with color tattoos, the other unmistakable mark of an aid worker of our generation. I shifted in my seat and rubbed at the spot on my forearm where, hidden beneath my shirt, lay a sprig of lavender tattoo that when I'd got it made me feel fresh and cute and now just looked like a children's crayon drawing.

"Condoms."

"No."

"HIV-AIDS medicines."

"No."

"Housing."

"Clean water."

"Childcare."

"No, no, and no," said the professor, clasping his hands aloft. "They asked for swim lessons."

A murmur of "whats?"

"Mombasa's on the coast," one guy offered.

"Yeah, but—" the woman who had lived for a year in Kenya answered, not willing to be outdone on *her* country.

"They wanted swim lessons," the professor continued, "because their clients live in yachts."

He didn't have to say anything more. Not for me; I could see it all: the universal language of brown-black women in bright-colored bikinis, lankering their legs froggy style as they swam up to the big, slick boat.

Ladder. Hand with a gold watch.

"Drink?"

Arm around the waist.

"You like this room? How about this one?"

"Say what? Yes, yacht is very big!"

Later, to his friends, stretched on the leather couch, "the astonishing thing is, the only thing we shared in common was the English language. Do you know she lived in Mombasa her whole life and just recently learned how to swim?"

"Lucky for you," the friend says, the chum in all good boys' tales who witnesses but never scolds.

And whatever He with the gold watch says back she does not know; she has lost from her classroom of scarred desks the thread of his tale, because what would it feel like to be proud of taking something from a woman like that? A woman who required the assistance of the Americans or Brits or Israelis or other tattooed peoples to teach her how to swim so that she could reach the cocks with the money attached to them, like the hard magic fruit in the type of glittering fairy tale where you never know when the princess will get trapped, only that she will.