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the cream-colored leather couch that felt cold under my fingertips and waited. Empty and tense and white space and sitting. No books around to look at or records to play.

Giuliana returned and began to cook. I asked her for tea. My father returned and stated, "Before lunch?"

I said, "At the same time." My throat hurt. He didn't care.

We ate while they talked of money and watched the TV news to see if they won the lottery. Giuliana showed me news in the paper of another earthquake. It said that Forlì was at high risk.

On Safari

Amanda Gersh

1.

CLAIRE HAD LEAPT AT THE CHANCE OF GOING ON SAFARI WITH her mother, principally because for four days, nothing much would be expected of her. Her life—afflicted by tepid decision making, inexplicable bouts of homesickness (despite living in her hometown) and an inscrutable boyfriend—had begun to shift towards wretched. It was time to cast her vote, voice her objections, pack some boxes. But the thought of all that activity made her feel fatigued. She did not want to speak. And where better to be, then, than with her mother, who would do enough talking for both of them, prowl about the tented camps making friends, introducing her daughter, perhaps, as "my cub"?

That would be fine, Claire thought, sipping a flat, metallic Coke on the plane. So long as she does not refer to me as a "daughter of Africa." It was possible; her mother had been known to get carried away. Yet there was something comforting in this embarrassing side of her mother, the way she reacted to other tourists, adding her own spin on the spectacle. And right now Claire was up for watching, was desperate to be pulled out of her world and thrust into the immaculate contrivance of three-hundred-dollars-a-night nature. There, she would learn things she had no need for, and ultimately, little interest in. And like everyone else, she would be filled with wonder but it would leave no permanent mark.

She watches the scrub spooling out below, an endless veld offering her a Platonic ideal of passive leisure:

Watching a tortoise threading its way through the veld.
 Watching a [insert animal] [verb] itself through the veld.
 Watching.
 She could manage that.

The plane flies into Victoria Falls airport; she can see the falls, "The Smoke That Thunders," miles before they land. Claire's tongue feels thick and foreign from not talking but this is what she wants.

This and some familial tug from the horizontalness of Zimbabwe. The muted brown dust, the broad skies, seed pods, and flat, rested look of it. Her mother's birthplace. The bush always looked the same, impervious to time and temperament like a memory, and that fixed feeling—to move cleanly through a permanent landscape in one anti-septic gliding motion—was what Claire was after. Of course, it was all a lie. There was nothing suspended and immutable about this landscape. There was more action going on in the veld than at home in Johannesburg, murder capital of the world.

But she turns, rather, to thoughts of the last safari experience, a splurge at her former stepfather's expense at Sabi Sabi in South Africa, which was something of a glorified zoo, replete with model-jawed white game rangers and animals that performed like the superstars they were. An expensive, simulated kind of nature, groomed and distilled to its Discovery Channel-style high points. She'd loved every second of it. The way four days could seem like four weeks, only to be forgotten in four hours once home . . . This was all long ago, and much had changed, but she could hope for a little of the same.

The roar of the falls (or is it the plane?) drowns her out and she is pleased for it. Her pleasure extends and becomes a bright, blank cheer that sweeps her up as they touch down at Victoria Falls airport. She steps out into a wide unbroken sunlight with its forceful promise.

Her mother, Doreen, is waiting, she has not seen her in seven months; she has some sort of bone suspended around her neck. Doreen—in a burst of post-divorce energy—has been in Mauritius starting a business and on closer inspection, the piece of bone may be shell. Hello darling. She hugs, and Claire feels the necklace scrape into her neck, which hurts; she doesn't pull away but falls instead further into her. Her mother smells like her mother. Home in a whiff, ironically, of "Paris."

2.

They are driving in an open Jeep to Matetsi Game Reserve. The sky is above, is ahead, is behind, an expansive, lazy kind of showing-off that should please Claire. But the sun is drilling a headache into her. It seems deliberate, channeled, as with the magnifying glass she used to train on ants as a child, and now she has doubts as to whether she'll manage to feel the complacency her mother is paying for. She sees the ants burn and pop in the hard sun.

Yet as the Jeep swerves into Matetsi and Claire takes in the low teakwood decks extending into the bush, the neatly thatched roofs, the smell of potato bush, she is impressed. Dislocation seems eminently possible after all. Lilac-breasted rollers dip above her head; the camp looks like it is in a permanent sleep. Already, she feels rested and simple. She ignores herself. She feels calm and irrelevant. Even her mother looks calm and irrelevant, her broad hat shielding freckled Scottish skin, cheekbones so high they looked almost indecent.

And here they are.

"Here we are," said the driver. (Claire remembers from before how everyone stated the obvious in the bush, unable to do away with speech. There's the lion. Isn't it beautiful? Look at that!)

"Here we are," Claire echoed, enjoying the familiar turn on her tongue. Comfort in repetition.

The camp opened out like a hand into the surrounding bush. Tented rondavel cottages dotted around a central palm of thatch-roofed deck. Matetsi was put together with an artful artlessness, a sumptuousness that nonetheless felt bare-bones and inoffensive. Wood, canvas, and everywhere, an unobstructed view of the pan beyond. The rainy season being in full swing, the watering hole drew animals in droves. Now, a herd of buck. A moment later, a single zebra that immediately made her think of some car advert.

"Would you look at that!" Doreen lifted her chin as she took in the panoramic sweep of the pan, and closer in, the sleepy shade of Matetsi itself.

Claire looked. Lunch waited: lamb with rosemary, butternut squash and beetroot salad. Guests wafted by and smiled encouragingly at the new arrivals with the slightly superior ease and proprietary

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edge born of a two-day head start on the scene. Men in hats drank Zimbabwean beer on the edge of the deck and smoked; a glamorous American couple exerted some glamour in the corner, but quietly, in their J. Crew cargo pants. Claire decided she liked the Americans, decided she would base all her judgement in this four-day period on first impressions, a luxury she felt was within the exclusive jurisdiction of her capacity as a tourist. She liked the J. Crew couple. At least they were putting those pants to proper use.

Out on the pan, something stamped.

"Phyllis Ndlovu is the head manager of Tent Lodge," said Andrew, who had picked them up at the airport. "She looks delicate," he joked, "but Phyllis is actually one of Zimbabwe's most famous guides, the first woman game ranger, we believe, in Africa, and one of the only guides in our camp certified to take you on an approach walk. If you ask nicely." Andrew had one of those so-called open faces that looked more like a closed fist to Claire. He was of her mother's people—Eastern Cape boy, farming family, rugby legs. Solid.

"No walks today." Phyllis pointed at a swollen cheek. "I have a bad toothache."

People swarmed around Phyllis and the other guides, wanted in. The guides: five young Zimbabweans, the handpicked, the precious finds of the South African-run Conservation Corporation lodges, a string of low-key, high-priced camps in Southern Africa and Kenya. The guests were in good hands.

And Doreen was excited, lurched over to Phyllis with a nurse's advice despite dropping out of nursing school, and then shook hands with other tourists, especially a middle-ager so exaggeratedly handsome he seemed to Claire to be oppressively four-dimensional. Terrifying, in a Tony Robbins "Personal Power" motivational speaker kind of way. But she must not be objectionable, must introduce herself properly to her mother's new posse (Doreen already ensconced at the Personal Power corner of the table, firing up her Dunhill Light, starting her speech: "I was born near here and grew up on a farm in South Africa so I really enjoy the bush . . .")

"Fintistic," said Personal Power, the vowels swimming thin and close together, New Zealand-style. "And this is your sister?" He winked a too-blue eye at Claire, introduced himself; she decided then she would try to forget his name.

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"Yes, she says, lying!" Doreen (third person when being cute) chugs on the Dunhill and Claire looks out at the Toyota zebra who is still at the pan. "No, not my sister—this is my cub!"

Claire finds she cannot last long with this scene (Doreen eats a bowl of maize meal and pronounces its Xhosa name—*gnush*—correctly, showing off her rural upbringing) and leaves the table. This was another good thing about being on safari—it was acceptable to ignore people and go off by yourself. They think you want to commune with nature, and never think you are simply trying not to commune with them.

She takes her plate out to the pool, a sudden, deep bowl of water hiding behind bush. She lowers her hot legs into the cold water. Out near the pan she watches an elephant shaking a tree, pods rattling, the sound carrying. Briefly, she considers the origins of her natural peevishness, but dismisses the act on the grounds of its being peevish in and of itself. She tells herself to brace up, as her mother would say. The elephant is decimating the tree. Good. Bark splits and seeds fall down like spilled beads, clicking as they go. Better.

Doreen appears, she is buoyant and barefoot. She pulls up a wooden chair, leans back into it, wonders if her new friend from Auckland may be gay. There is evidence; he has a tiny backpack. He is patrolling around in very high-waisted pleated pants but isn't this place wonderful? She squeezes Claire's shoulder, a comma of hair slipping over her ear. "I mean when you see this are you not proud and amazed at where you come from? . . . How could anyone want to be anywhere else?"

This was Doreen, the slightly belligerent exclamations, the roundly expansive, exultant tone always spinning into the groove of habit, always tracing the lines of generality. These speeches, flecked with her mother's jubilant parochialism worn smooth as stone from years of use, the sentences knitted from negative constructions, modified by nothing, shot through by long, staccato series of rhetorical questions were extremely annoying, but redeemed by their ritual element. In Claire's eyes they had the same status as a nursery rhyme. Meaningless nonsense, but it was the telling that counted. And the consistency. She swirls her legs in the pool water and waits for the inevitable. When Doreen got on a roll, she invariably ended up saying something so ridiculous, it was sublime . . . here it comes, here it comes . . .

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"I mean, tell me: where else in the world can you see Victoria Falls?"

Claire closed her eyes and smiled with derision and gratitude. It is the feeling of being someone's child, Doreen's child, a dubious honor but it had been a long time.

Later, there was a good bath in a tub lined with Zambian copper. Beautiful. In the bath she thinks: I am on holiday and it is uncomplicated. She has had trouble with her mother this last year but they are there in the spirit of mutual contrition and Claire has not yet forgotten how to admire Doreen.

Soft from the bath, she emerges feeling magnanimous. She wraps herself in a plush Matetsi robe, feels her benevolence toward her mother expand into smugness, watches herself in the mirror. She cannot read her own expression; it is filled with contradiction, but the benevolence is somewhere in there and she moves soundlessly outside onto the dark patio for a cigarette. She is exhilarated; they are not supposed to be on their decks at night, there is considerable risk of leopard and lion and she is alone, passing mental blessings to her mother from on high with the conciliatory half-smile of a priest.

She cannot quantify how, exactly, her mother has wronged her, but it is connected to the things she no longer does, the things she no longer is since her divorce. She has become violently happy, peculiar and childish. She is given to providing elaborate, confusing endnotes to her marriage, in which neither she nor Claire's stepfather emerges in a good light. She is too full of information.

Claire inhales smoke, paces the deck self-importantly, feels as if she is in a movie. Her mother is virtually unrecognizable. But she is going to forgive her anyway; she is even endangering her own life to stage this great cinematic blessing. Doreen is up ahead somewhere, in a square of light through the Mangosteen trees, holding court with her new friends. Claire breathes in the darkness and waits for something to come and take her.

That night, she dreams the hallucination dreams of Larium, the malaria drug. She dreams the perfect meta-dream—that Larium is a vast money-making conspiracy powered by the Conservation Corporation and other tourist establishments, and in fact it is really an hallucinogenic drug designed to fool people into thinking they were on safari

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and seeing animals, when in reality they were just experiencing visions.

3.

By morning Claire feels fresh and focused, her bathroom/patio epiphany having left a residual whiff of ebullience. She walks onto the main deck, 5:20 A.M., for the first drive. Bring it on, she thinks, closing her hands around her coffee mug as she watches the low yellowed pan pretending stillness. Let us have some action. On cue, a sable antelope pulls out of the mist, its horns combed back in two perfect black spikes. She is sorry Doreen has missed it.

"Good morning." It was Vincent, the guide, eating a rusk. "You're up first. A morning person."

"I'm not. But I'm never myself on holiday."

The others came soon after. They clambered into the open Jeep in silence, drugged up for the mosquitoes, no one talking as the vibrations rocked them awake. As they rode, the land swelled, expelling damp smells already beginning to dry out under an assertive sunrise. The first spot was a pair of young giraffe and Vincent turned off the ignition and let them look in silence. The giraffe stared them down, flicked tails, and swayed away on trembling legs as thin as golf clubs.

There are six of them in the Jeep including New Zealand (his hairless shiny calves almost touching Doreen's) but Claire does not spend much time worrying about him and is caught in the rise and fall of the Jeep as it dips through dongas, bumping her binoculars. She is all eyes now, and eager, like her mother. She feels good and rooted, the landscape is sweeping by as if on a conveyor belt. The veld is quiet looking but they know better and are on a quest to spot what they cannot yet see.

Vincent stops to pick them monkey bread and toothbrush bush for their teeth and as Claire eats the bitter white pith of the monkey bread pod she feels curiously unlike herself. She does not stop to think it through else she will spoil it; she must keep going and observe, observe, observe.

A herd of zebra cut through the trees and they veer off the road to get closer. They can smell the dust, almost shockingly sweet, as if someone had spread cinnamon on the landscape in the night. Her

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mother pokes and prods her—buffalo in the distance, crested barbet at three o'clock from the branch of a Waterberry tree—and Claire is now sufficiently taken that she tests herself in a rebel thought of her troublesome boyfriend, his hands cool and clamped like starfish onto her back, but his face is obscured, she is forgetting him well.

As they head closer in toward the Zambezi river, the sun begins to bleach the grasses and the group begins to agitate, opening morning mouths to the new day.

"Magical," says a chunky, animated woman with big green cat eyes named Sharon who had befriended Doreen the night before and spoken to her of divorce and witchcraft. They are hoping for something big—fresh lion spoor, perhaps. Sharon spots a Kori Bustard shuffling beneath an acacia tree.

"What kind of bastard?" New Zealand pipes up.

"Bustard," Doreen corrects loudly, skimming through her bird book to show the offending party. "The heaviest flying bird in the world."

"He's joking," Claire says, pleased to point out the idiot side of her mother's new friend, although suddenly Doreen is laughing her fake laugh that sounds real to those who do not know her.

"Ha ha," Doreen says to New Zealand and prods him.

"What would my chances be if you left me here with no gun to walk back to camp?" Claire asks Vincent, glancing off into a grove of Msasa trees.

"Not good."

"Lions." Claire states the obvious because at least she can count on that.

"The mighty king of the jungle," New Zealand intones. "The big boys."

"Actually, the lion is the false king of the bush." Vincent started the ignition. "Lions are sloppy, unsuccessful hunters. Maybe a thirty percent success rate."

Claire does not like this information, the surprising, confusing ineptness of the lion feels like a personal betrayal. "Now the wild dog—there's an animal with an amazing success rate," Vincent continues. "Not that they would be after you, of course."

"So who's the king of the jungle then?" a J. Crew representative spoke up.

Doreen is first, eager to impart her knowledge. "The elephant."

"You are right," Vincent says. "The most impressive animal, in every way."

"Matriarchal society," Doreen adds with a knowing nod. "Very advanced."

"Yes."

Doreen and Sharon high-fived and Doreen did a little celebratory *toyi toyi* African dance kind of move. To her horror, Claire found herself prevailed upon to join in the female bonding as Sharon high-fived her and coerced the American girl behind to join in. What could you do but comply when someone high-fived you? There was nowhere to hide. Claire held up her hands in defeat and felt herself go out of body and observe the mortifying spectacle of herself, her hands being clapped loudly in the air but luckily the end was in sight, there was something ahead to help her out, something to observe that was not a soft pale hand from Sharon or a shiny knee from New Zealand jiggling toward Doreen's—elephant.

They sat quiet for a minute watching the animals at a distance, particularly a mother trying to teach a baby how to use its trunk, which by the looks of things required a lot of effort.

"Like trying to teach you to talk," Doreen commented in her ear.

But then it all got loud and clumsily terrifying as a pregnant mother shot out of the trees, her wrinkled belly dusty and swaying. She pulled up, then ran again straight, trumpeting and flapping her ears as she made for the Jeep. Claire thought she might die, didn't really think she would but knew it was possible and suddenly and for no imaginable reason it occurred to her how much she secretly enjoyed *Baywatch* and she wondered if once she was gone her boyfriend would overestimate her role in his life, build her up to be a veritable inspiration.

She ducked into the darkness of her mother's shoulder; she remembers this, on the last safari trip there had been a similar episode on a night drive with a startled leopard, and both she and her mother had hidden in her perfectly still stepfather Peter's down jacket.

Next to them New Zealand shouted and in the seat behind there was scuffling. Only the guide, the tracker and Doreen remained completely motionless, and then the guide made a lot of noise, waved his arms and the animal veered and backed away into the trees.

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"Jesus," said New Zealand.

Claire is shaking and she comes back into the sunlight with a ridiculous spill of love for her mother that is so pure and rare and disproportionate to anything her mother has done to earn it just now, but she thinks wildly of a way to prolong it; it seems they should make the most of it, get their money's worth.

"Remember last time," Claire suggests as they ride back to camp. "You and Peter were the only ones who could handle it." She is sure pitch-perfect Doreen will remember the truth of her own terror, of the way she hid with her daughter in Peter's jacket, but Claire is sure Doreen will comply and fortify the goodwill gesture, help contrive a holiday moment built on a small white lie in which she, Doreen emerges courageous. And everyone wins.

"Peter?" Doreen whips out her Chapstick. "He couldn't even see the leopard. He could barely even make out the veld, let alone the animals. Not brave darling, just blind."

All through the road back to camp Claire wonders how she could have forgotten her stepfather's flawed night vision, though she has forgotten so much of him—since the divorce, Peter has slunk away into a land of golf and silent apology for being less than capable. But now she has something new to remember him by. The one thing worth forgetting.

"Next time," Doreen chides breezily, patting Claire's knee, "don't hide. Make eye contact."

That night, the group was giddy. How could they know flapping ears signaled a mock charge? Even Doreen hadn't known. They had all felt near death, the escape was a collective coup, and everyone dove into the hard drinks and spoke at the tops of their lungs, filled with a sense of achievement that required a grand reliving through dialogue. Lots of first-name repeating and wandering around the deck in blankets.

"Doreen, you were amazing. Like a rock," said New Zealand, swimming in Scotch-and-Daughter-of-Africa inflected admiration. "Absolutely calm. I was completely shattered by the sheer power of that beast, the awesome . . ."

Clichés of wonderment abounded, words like "sheer" and "beast"

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coated the conversation. Safari vocabulary was fundamentally embarrassing to Claire but she was also envious of those who could enter into the spirit of it, those so capable of prompting such earnestness in themselves.

For her part, Doreen became more and more inflated with quiet jubilation, protesting out of good manners her resilience in the face of the awesome beast of sheer power, and finally giving in to the credit that was her due. "I grew up not far from here. My instincts just kicked in," she explained modestly. "You just have to sit there and project strength toward the animal. It's very mental."

Off to the side, Claire pulled a piece of hair out of her head and dropped it onto a loose coal. It hissed and smelled of rust. She sat up close until she felt hot and red and sick, spitting bitten nail and peeled skin into the flames. Yet through the fire and the drinks and the voices she began to uncurl and fill with the evening and the long, bloated day, soaking it up to the point at which weak Peter's weak eyes could not ruin anything. Soon she was in full sway, caught up in the snap and kick of the logs in the fire, the flickering light of predictable conversation, the present-tense ease and dumb inconsequentiality of it all.

Doreen spoke on behalf of the pregnant elephant, dispensed feminine wisdom and banalities about maternal instincts. In the background the landscape performed obediently and in time. Lit up by tastefully unobtrusive but strategic lighting, silver elephants trumpeted and moved in their slow-motion way, extras offering visual accompaniment to the stories told of them up front by the real kings and queens.

Her mother—in her new incarnation as Head Mother—was now in full storytelling mode, and there were anecdotes about child rearing and embellished narratives about a family pet, Goldie, and Claire's inability to turn the Yorkshire terrier into a watchdog. Doreen had a few standard Claire stories and she always told them in a certain way. Claire heard again of a small self she did not know doing things she probably never had done, but regardless, serving her mother's stories well and consistently, a roaring success even as she hovered off to the side and pretended not to hear.

She thought of Goldie then, her shivery legs as thin as Bic pens. The dog had been a bit of a runt, but they had taken good care of her and through her fog of gin and adrenaline from the afternoon Claire

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found the story to be excellent, found it all—from the memory of Goldie to the unattractive people around her—a profoundly excellent situation. Refilling her glass she smiled, feeling ill with a fraudulent power in the ability to manufacture pleasure.

From time to time there was quiet, and then a line or two from the well-thumbed book: “I could get used to this,” someone obliged and Claire applauded the statement. It was the right thing to say and she shot the speaker some good vibes and thought again of how out there the talk had to take a familiar, repetitive route. Evidently, there was no such thing as “too beautiful for words,” no such thing as “not to mention . . .”

She got drunk thinking in her own paradoxes, stumbled away from the fire and toward the edge of the deck, wanted to observe them all at a distance, these people with whom she felt a newfound, highly embarrassing thrill of kinship.

Doreen followed, she was charged, also a bit tipsy, she had red-wine mouth and Claire knew she should report the dark lip stain to her vain mother but she did not.

“Poor Goldie,” Doreen said suddenly as Claire looked up at the stars which seemed almost too bright, untrustworthy, like planetarium stars. “But she was always hovering.”

“What?”

“There’s the southern cross. They’re the only stars that matter. You always know where you are when you see the southern cross. Frankly I don’t know how northern hemisphere people can even operate without the cross.”

Claire looks for the cross, of course she knows it but she can’t see it, though her mother is pointing into the sky and marking constellation points with her finger. “There it is,” she says again. “No you’re not looking right. There!” and Claire is irritated. What is the point of pointing into the sky? she thinks. Such a futile gesture, impossible to track, fueling impatience on all sides.

“Can you see it now?” Doreen’s lips are a thin blackened line.

“What is it you want to tell me?” Claire does not want to hear whatever is coming next but she knows she has no choice for there is something in her that inspires her mother to confide.

“Do you remember what happened to Goldie?” Doreen says swilling more wine, giving up on the stars, putting her back to the sky view

that stretches low into the horizon.

Claire well remembered the dog’s sudden disappearance just before they moved house in the year she turned nine. It appeared the dog had been stolen, Claire’s Aunt Lane had seen two old people with apple cheeks putting her into a car and Claire had cried but Goldie would have a good home with the dear old people, her mother had explained.

“She wasn’t stolen.” Doreen first backtracks a bit, wondering aloud if she would tell even though Claire knew this was just her mother’s storytelling device, a way to up the suspense. “I had her put to sleep, even though she wasn’t sick.” Doreen is not proud of this but the dog was irritating her, and they were about to move house and she didn’t think feeble Goldie would adjust well to the move. It was yet another headache in a string of complications and she just couldn’t face it, it was easier to dispense with Goldie altogether.

“I’ve never told anyone before, except your Aunt Lane. She came with me to the vet.” Claire imagines Lane holding the dog. Lane is small with permed hair, is the kind of person who collects soaps and does not use them, is the kind of person who collects picture frames and doesn’t put pictures in them. Claire likes Lane because she is depressing and never changes, never shocks anyone with her happiness. She is fifty-five, she has been fifty-five since she was thirty. But now she seems like someone else, lying carefully about old people with red cheeks. Who knew? Maybe she was using her soap collection by now . . . anything was possible.

“Please don’t ever tell your brother.”

Claire shakes her head, lurches away. “What a weird story,” she says loudly, disoriented, edging back toward the fire and remembering Goldie’s back thick with ticks, how as children they would pick them off like treasure and drop them into the flames where they would sizzle and explode releasing black blood.

“You can say something,” Doreen says, following, pretending to steel herself for criticism though she knows she needn’t bother. Humiliated, Claire remains wordless and it is exactly what her mother counts on when she makes her confessions.

Wordless, only watching as her mother’s lips get darker by the sip. Such cheap wine.

4.

Doreen watched her at breakfast the next morning and tried to send her cheerful glances. In Doreen's world, morning signaled an automatic forgiveness. And Claire knew her mother had it all wrong, thought Claire's anger derived solely from what Doreen had done to the dog. Only the half of it.

Phyllis, the head manager, rounds them up after the meal. She will be taking a small group on an on-foot safari.

"Everybody has to agree to leave the vehicle on an approach walk. I cannot leave anyone here. It is an all or nothing thing," Phyllis drilled the group as she revved the Jeep. Yes, they all nodded, though she spoke of danger. Of binary oppositions: in or out, everyone or no one. Claire tied her shoelaces in vicious double-knots.

"Yes," said the American couple, an immediate yes, too, from New Zealand who is more than ready to display his wildness and his good legs in shorts. And, of course, yes from Doreen, who cannot refuse another opportunity to deploy her exacting instincts to great effect, especially in front of a woman ranger.

As branches switched across their arms, Phyllis congratulated them on their intrepidity and the group vied for her approval, overreacted to dull sightings of common birds and interesting trees. Claire found raptors, pointed them out in a nest.

"Good eyes," Phyllis said.

Phyllis stopped the Jeep as the tracker saw two black water buffalo on a hill. While the group assembled in the grass everyone went quiet, even Doreen. Out of the Jeep it felt different and somber, less adventure, more plain foolishness.

"Stand close together and form a chain. We want to look like one long animal." Phyllis spoke slowly. There was no more chattiness to her tone now. She was a professional, and her charges were all totally useless, when it came down to it. "And no talking." She picked up her long gun. "Come."

As they walked through the grass she told the group in a low voice about the water buffalo, an extremely dangerous animal with excellent vision, hearing and warlike, military tactics when in a group. "You will not know if a buffalo is going to attack. And these guys can run."

Claire got the bigger buffalo in her binoculars. She did not want to

walk towards that thing. Everything she knew vetoed the movement of her legs. But it was all or nothing. She had to move with the group.

"We will walk towards it very, very slowly. No gaps in the chain." Phyllis demonstrated hand signals (get down, retreat but don't show your back, etc.) until they got too close to speak and it was all gesture from then on.

Claire inhabited the crunching rhythm of feet as they walked on, and breathed in the spaces between. She and Doreen were in the rear, the tracker behind them.

They walk and it is totally quiet in the spaces between the footfalls yet Claire begins to feel something building there, some mad courage or weakness, she cannot tell the difference, only that it is involuntary, is making a racket in her head and she is simply going to open her mouth because it is time she spoke and finally, she is ready.

They move down into the grass; it appears the buffalo have not yet seen them. "Why did you tell me what you did to Goldie?" Claire whispers as her mother's knees click into a crouch beside her. Disbelieving, Doreen holds a finger to her lips.

"Why would you tell me a thing like that?" The first buffalo lowers its head, the legs begin to shift; he is standing, he has seen them. Or heard Claire. Phyllis slashes the air with her hand, motioning for everyone to freeze.

The lids of Doreen's eyes widen above the irises. The animal is watching.

"You could have said nothing," Claire continues close into her mother's ear, knowing Doreen is not going to speak, not now when she is in survival mode. The buffalo takes a step forward, the second buffalo moves into position, flanking.

Doreen's nostrils flare and her breathing moves into a deep beat of anger worse than anger because she has to contain it. You have completely lost it, Claire thinks. Your instincts are way off.

Now they are all retreating, inching back slowly on their haunches. Phyllis is calm but moving them all carefully backwards. The animals do not break eye contact. And then Claire sees how it's going to go and though she knows it is too cruel a punishment she wills it to happen, she wants a clean answer and a proper solution.

Come on. Take her out, she thinks, willing the buffalo to do it,

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positioning herself behind her mother, out of range. Claire's hands rest on Doreen's shoulderblades with a full apology; she is not proud, but she cannot protect her mother and it is not her job.

She sees Doreen in the brightness, limp and flapping, blood shining on her legs as the animal tosses her into the dust and she lands, dying before she has a chance to know she is really dying.

Later there are guides crowding Claire with hot, over-sugared tea, blankets, cell phones, faxes; flying home with Doreen's hat in her lap; the family standing in a line at the airport; Doreen's sister Lane at her grave, bloodless, staring, and thinking not of the buffalo but of the dog, a runt anyway that did not especially embrace life.

5.

It is their last day; they visit the Falls, Claire has seen them before. They make her feel sick but she is happy to see them again, unchanged, an endless repetition of themselves. Her mother says nothing. She is hidden in a yellow raincoat, uncharacteristically cryptic. Claire cannot tell if she is still angry or chastened or both. She toys with her own silence. There have been many silences that are not silent. And now Doreen is picking up on this trick and the symmetry between them is lost.

"Hey Mom," Claire shouts above the roar of the falls, "where else in the world . . . ?"

In her mother's refusal to speak she glimpses the other side, when a rhetorical question is not always rhetorical, and a person can end up saying things just to engage the remote one. But here the water is so loud and vaporous it does all the work for them, filling in the gaps like white noise; it is literally white noise.

As they leave she remembers a story one of the guides told her of a tourist who slipped over last year on her honeymoon; she held on for a moment but her husband couldn't reach her. It is easy to fall; it happens more than the tourist boards care to say and if one were nearby when it happened, one wouldn't hear a thing.

Claire keeps an eye on her mother as they walk along the edge through the rainforest.

Watching a mother walk along the edge.

Watching a [insert animal] [verb] along the edge.

In the midst of the mortal faults that we go to great lengths to hide, we construct human masterpieces.

A Project for *Open City* by Meghan Gerety