



A Pale Chanting

by Dwight Holing

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The lie lay between them, there in the double bed beneath a red Maasai blanket, beneath the canvas ceiling, beneath the African moon dissolving into dawn. Outside, a lion prowled the tall grass roaring impatiently for his huntresses. The ground trembled from elephants steered by memories passed on by those who had passed by before. A go-away bird's cry sounded like a petulant child. Robert listened to the Serengeti awaken, knowing that Sylvie was listening, too, wishing he could reach across and pull her to him if not for the divide grown wide by the truth behind the lie.

The camp waterboy finally signaled it was time to get up by singing "*jambo, jambo*" from the tent's veranda as he placed a tray of wake-up coffee and arrowroot biscuits on the outdoor table. He splashed a pail of hot water into a basin set on a folding wooden stand beneath a mirror hanging from a tree branch and called, "This shave water ready."

Robert pulled on his boots and stepped from the long night into a new day. Five other luxury tents formed a crescent on the crest of a rise overlooking the savannah. A canvas village housing the kitchen and camp staff was pitched a discreet distance away in a stand of yellow fever trees. He sipped the silty coffee and marveled at the illusion of permanence. None of it was here a few days ago and it would only be here as long as the main herds of wildebeest, zebras, and gazelles kept marching toward the Mara River and braved crocodiles and drowning to reach the fresh graze on the Kenyan side. When the waves of animals dwindled down to the old and the lame, the tents would be struck and swept up in the journey, as much a part of the great migration as the prey leading and the predators following, their speed and direction dictated by sun and rain, birth and death. Only dust and memories would remain, and even those would fade with time.

He left the binoculars hanging from his neck as he scanned the savannah for movement. Flat-topped acacia trees studded the sea of grass and the bulbous trunks of the baobabs looked like zeppelins plunged to Earth. Robert spotted a trio of ostriches not fifty feet away. Two males flushed pink to signal their virility were jousting over a drab female who seemed more interested in pecking the ground for locusts still sluggish with dew than mating. A family of warthogs scurried into the tall grass to get out of their way, the four piglets chasing after the big-teated sow, her upraised tail with its tuft of coarse bristles signaling the same as a tour guide's umbrella. Overhead, the stars grew as faint as grains of salt poured on a glass table then blown quietly and steadily away. He sensed the planet's spin beneath his feet, felt the Serengeti move to take its rightful turn in the sun, carrying him further from home and all that he knew.

It was Sylvie's suggestion to go on safari, but Robert didn't need any convincing. A once-in-a-lifetime adventure, she kept calling it, clinging as if to a mantra the same words printed in bold on the homepage of the outfitter's website. A distraction was what she really meant, but Robert didn't say that out loud. Since his diagnosis he avoided saying things like 'bucket list' around her, sticking to the lie they told themselves, rarely giving into gallows humor – *rire jaune*, as she called it. He smiled at that. Even the grim sounded pretty in her native tongue.

Robert had always wanted to come to Africa, just never had made the time, his

surgery practice demanding, his travel usually restricted to medical conferences. Whenever he did take a trip he always packed his binoculars for birding, a pastime he'd picked up in college to break the monotony of stuffy classrooms and hours hunkered in windowless labs. The species he spotted were usually of common variety, but no matter if robin, sparrow, or jay, each was confirmation that he was part of a life much bigger, more enduring than his could ever be.

Now the birdsong surrounding him rose to a febrile pitch as the sky lightened, illuminating insects to be snapped up, flowers to sip, rodents to hunt, and carcasses to scavenge. Robert closed his eyes and tried to distinguish the monkey-like chatter of a white-browed coucal from the rising coo of a laughing dove, the stutter of a superb starling showing off its iridescent beauty to a prospective mate. He had done his homework before coming, bought all the field guides on East African birds he could find, downloaded recordings off the internet, listened to them instead of dosing himself with Ambien for the 25-hour flight from San Francisco. He'd set a goal of seeing 200 new species the three weeks he'd be in Tanzania. It wasn't too ambitious considering how many inhabited this part of the world, and he was well on his way to achieving it, perhaps even eclipsing it. Each new sighting earned a checkmark and notation on a list he carried in the front pocket of his khaki safari vest. He went over it each night to test himself, an exercise he conducted with the same precision he gave to crossword puzzles, a way to gauge the progress of the disease, the 'slow slide' as he dismissed his early-onset dementia, the sobriquet an attempt to keep at arms distance that which his medical degree and practice had made him no less immune than a day laborer, a carpenter, a cop.

Opening his eyes again, Robert spotted a flutter atop a distant candelabra tree and raised his binoculars, hoping to see a bird that still eluded him, the pale chanting goshawk. His field guide described it as a beautiful, sleek-winged raptor with a haunting, lyrical call that hunted in the air as well as on the ground. What intrigued him was its triangular mating behavior to ensure breeding success, one of the few polyandrous species in the animal world. The *Jules et Jim* of birds, Robert smiled to himself, thinking that's just how Sylvie would describe the males in the feathered *ménage*. But this time it was only a gust of wind blowing some branches. And then he remembered it was time for breakfast.

"They'll be serving soon," he called over his shoulder. "Are you about ready?"

Sylvie's reply was muffled, nearly drowned in a swaddling of soft cotton sheets. "Not quite."

Robert didn't need to turn around to see her, the way her hair framed her face no matter if tousled by sleep or newly cut, the way her eyes sparkled with laughter or flashed with anger, smoldered during sex or glistened with tears. So far he didn't have to work at it to keep Sylvie's image branded in his memory like he did with so many others. Or at least he told himself so. Again, the power of the lie. It protected him from losing control, what he feared above all – the day he saw her but didn't, the day he looked into the mirror and couldn't place the man with the shaving cream on his jaw, a toothbrush in his hand.

"You want me to wait?" he asked.

Sylvie sucked in her breath before blowing it out as if to extinguish what could never be. "Go ahead," she finally said. "I'll be along."

The head guide was named Justice and his second called himself Goodluck. They were standing by the campfire sipping tea from bone china cups and saucers with a cabbage rose pattern. Flames licked dried sticks that the campfire tender had gathered from beneath a nearby sausage tree. He had been extra careful in his selection after a story spread like the lightning-strike blazes that hopscotched across the grasslands. Another tender had been bitten by a black mamba that had slithered into the wood pile during the night. The cook had run over at the sound of his screams and hacked off the poisoned hand to stop the flow of fatal venom. Now at campfire pits throughout the park sticks were placed in the shape of a cross, a crescent, or the horns of a cow, depending on the tender's religion.

Goodluck greeted Robert with a toothy smile. "*Jambo?*" No matter if he was speaking Swahili or English, the lanky, good-natured guide always sounded as if he were asking a question.

Robert returned the greeting and then said good morning to Justice, the older and more experienced of the two. Both men came from the highlands of Mount Meru, Kilimanjaro's little sister, but they lived in different villages and belonged to different tribes, prayed to different gods.

"Good morning, Doctor. How did you sleep the night?" Justice asked in his quiet, deliberate way.

"Like a baby." He smiled, indulging himself a little in Sylvie's absence.

The African's liquid brown eyes washed over him and Robert got the feeling that Justice saw right through him, that eventually he'd ask about the lie. To put him off, he said, "Any chance I'll get my pale chanting today?"

The guide paused. He was stocky, his shaved round skull absorbing the morning sun like a black hole swallowing starlight. "It is possible, but it is up to the chanting. Today we hope for the leopard. There is a kopje with many trees by the river. It is a good place for this leopard. He watch for the impala there. This leopard like the impala very much. It is of proper size. He carry the impala up the tree to keep from the hyena. You like this place very much."

Two men walked into camp from the grassy plain. Colin was a freelance photographer hired by the outfitter to capture images for the website. He sported a week of stubble that matched his war correspondent's attire and air of confident indifference. A pair of cameras dangled from his neck on black neoprene straps. Imani followed a few steps behind. The Maasai wore a red blanket over his shoulders and hoop earrings strung with white cowry shells and trade beads. Strips cut from motorcycle tires were strapped to his narrow feet. The metal tip of his spear was the shape of a heart. Earlier, Colin had told Robert and Sylvie the story of how Imani killed a lion attacking his family's cattle when he was just a boy, said when he was out shooting pictures in the bush he wouldn't trade the Maasai and his spear for a half dozen big game hunters.

"See anything special?" Robert asked.

Colin accepted a coffee from the dining steward and took a moment to hold the delicate cup to his chin and inhale the curling steam. Brows that formed wings the color of a tawny eagle's hooded his pale eyes. "We tracked a herd of giraffes

through the night and shot them silhouetted against the rising sun. Brilliant.” He had some kind of accent, but Robert forgot where he was from. It wasn’t Australia or South Africa, that much he was sure of. Well, pretty sure of, anyway. “We were courtside to a pack of hunting dogs chasing down a hartebeest. Very efficient those dogs.”

“But you won’t be able to use that for advertising, will you? The kill shot, that is,” Sylvie said as she approached their circle.

The men turned to greet her. She was wearing a baseball cap and her short blonde ponytail was pulled through the opening above the strap. A silk scarf the color the tall grass turned in summer wrapped her long neck.

Colin didn’t try to hide his smile as she slipped between him and Robert. “Quite right,” he said. “Too unambiguous.”

“Show me.”

The photographer set his coffee down, raised one of the cameras, eyed the LCD monitor, and sidled closer. Sylvie didn’t flinch as he held it up for her to view the sequence of shots showing the hartebeest being ripped apart.

“Beautiful even in death,” she said.

“The hartebeest,” he said.

“That, too,” she said.

Robert watched his wife and the photographer, noted their restraint, heard their unspoken words, but then his thoughts turned to the deer-sized antelope with the caliper-shaped horns. He wondered if it ever considered giving up during the chase, if it clung to hope that it could still escape as the pack of calico dogs disemboweled it, pulled its entrails out in strings, gorged on its liver, chewed its heart while it still beat. When did the poor creature finally give over to the embrace of earth warmed by its own blood?

Justice looked up from his tea, the tiny cup and saucer looking all the more fragile in his calloused and capable hands. “This hartebeest eat the grass and the dog eat this hartebeest. Everything eat this hartebeest. The vulture eat what the dog leave behind. The hyena eat the bone. And the tortoise eat the hyena dung. Nothing of this hartebeest is to waste.”

They set out after breakfast in three royal blue Land Cruisers with a rhino’s profile painted in white on the front doors. Goodluck drove two other couples. The Liggets hailed from a wealthy suburb of Houston, the husband’s drawl and opinions seasoned by single mash and cigar smoke, the wife always saying the shows she watched on *Animal Planet* never mentioned anything about flies. The Matsuis lived in Tokyo and dressed like beekeepers to ward off the equatorial sun. Their English was limited to what they’d heard on CNN and learned online. A young guide-in-training drove the Custodies, a family of four from New Jersey. The parents spent most of their time shepherding the kids and explaining away their behavior. The daughter was in her early teens and sunbathed in a bikini even though Justice told her parents that it made the Muslim members of the staff uncomfortable. The son was much younger and had developed a case of

hero worship and pointed his silver automatic camera wherever Colin aimed his big telephoto lens, wore a scarf he borrowed from his mother like the photographer's black and white checked keffiyeh.

Robert sat in the front seat of the lead vehicle next to Justice who kicked his sandals off when he drove. The head guide's soles were hardened, his toenails like overwaxed floor tiles. He never stopped looking for animals no matter how rugged the road, how much the Land Cruiser bounced. It was as if his head was mounted on a gimbal. Sylvie and Colin stood on the back seat, their head and shoulders above the sunroof, their knees bent to absorb the bumpy dirt track with deep ruts carved during the rainy season. Robert pictured the wide plain of green grass as the open ocean, saw his wife and the photographer zipping across it on sailboards, the wind blowing their hair, a chain of tropical islands glimmering on the far horizon. Then he remembered. After the safari they were going to Zanzibar to wash the dust off at a beach resort. He'd be able to look for seabirds there and add to his list while she swam in the turquoise sea, lay on the white sand beach. He tried to recall the coastal section in the field guide, sifted through the pictures and names he'd filed away. Crab plovers, black winged stilts, a curlew of some kind, the exact name floating maddeningly just beyond his reach.

Justice downshifted and brought the three-ton vehicle shuddering to a stop. Robert snapped back to the moment, followed the African's gaze, knowing by now he had a sixth sense when it came to spotting wildlife, no matter how far the distance, how perfect their camouflage. His pulse quickened as he readied his binoculars. "Is it my pale chanting? Where?"

"It is the lilac-breasted roller. There." Justice pointed a stubby finger at the top of a nearby acacia. "Watch. You like this bird very much."

Robert thumbed the focus wheel and two birds filled the glass. The pair perched on the tip of a branch. Both had turquoise wings and their downy breasts were the color of French lavender, Sylvie's favorite flower. He pictured the cut bunches that she bought from sidewalk vendors stationed outside the downtown office building where she worked to fill the vases in their Pacific Heights flat, the live ones she grew in the terracotta pots on their deck with the sweeping view of the Golden Gate. He could hear her coo to them as she snipped and watered. *Mes enfants. Jolis bébés.* Until his diagnosis he'd never regretted not having children. No time for them, he always told himself, too busy running the surgery department, seeing patients, saving lives. But now that he'd slid into the in between time, slowly losing his past and not wanting to see his future, he wished for someone to be there, not to help take care of him, feed him, wipe his lips, his ass – he had a plan for that -- but to be there for her, Sylvie ten years younger than he. Robert glanced at the rearview mirror, seeing her perched there, the photographer, too.

"You see it?" Justice asked. "Watch this roller now."

Robert refocused his binoculars. One of the birds suddenly springboarded off the supple branch, swooping right at them then pulling up, using the momentum to slingshot skyward, its wings tucked in, its tail straight back. The bird zoomed up until gravity reclaimed control. Stalling, the roller pitched forward, cartwheeling as it plummeted, its feathers flashing like shards of colored glass trapped inside a kaleidoscope. Just before it crashed the bird pulled out and hopped back on the branch next to the other roller.

"The lilac-breasted roller mate until the end of time," said Justice, nodding as he

explained it. "This male dance for this female to show he still strong. He dance for this other male watching and waiting in this tree to show he still strong."

That evening they sat in canvas folding chairs circled around the campfire. The dining steward had freshened after-dinner drinks and Robert was nursing a tumbler of whisky as he conducted a mental exercise, carefully retracing the steps the kitchen crew took to ensure there was always enough ice even though their only refrigeration was powered by a portable solar panel. Sparks were shooting from the fire and joining the flicker of constellations he did not recognize when Ligget started grumbling that if Goodluck hadn't flanked the kopje instead of driving straight up to it as Justice had he wouldn't have missed seeing the leopard.

"Our boy's people misnamed him," the Texan drawled. "From now on I'm gonna start callin' him Badluck."

Sylvie glanced over at the dining tent where the guides were discussing plans for the next day's game drive before turning back to Ligget, her smile anything but. "People always want to end my name with an 'a.' Does anyone ever start yours with a 'b'?"

Ligget's jowls reddened even more than they already were from the campfire, but then he slapped his knee and laughed. "Well, hell, *mademoiselle*, I expect I had that comin'." He winked at Sylvie then jabbed his bourbon in the direction of the dining tent. "Hey, Goodluck. Y'all all right, ya hear?" He grinned at the others. "Guess there's plenty of kitty cats left to see, am I right, Doc? How 'bout it, Paparazzi? We gonna spot more?"

The tension discharged, the murmur of small talk rushed in. But Robert knew Sylvie wouldn't let go of Ligget's slur so easily, that she'd keep it bottled inside her along with the fear, the anger, and, most of all, the guilt she'd been holding onto ever since he told her the results of the tests he'd undergone following a series of troubling episodes. They started when he couldn't find his car in the hospital garage, a morning in the operating room when he had forgotten to wear his scrubs. When he had explained to Sylvie what they could expect, he described the sand castles he used to build on vacations with his parents, the carefully excavated moats catching but never stopping the ocean, each subsequent lap of foamy water slowly rounding the angular defense walls that he had patted painstakingly into place, the inevitable collapse of battlements, towers, and keep, the remaining hump of sand finally erased like birdcalls blown on the wind. As he spoke, he could see in her eyes that she would exchange if she could the slow and steady creep of the tide for the shock and surprise of one big wave. And that in wanting what she could never admit to herself, the lie was born.

Robert leaned across Sylvie and said to Colin, "Are you going out to take pictures tonight?"

The photographer, balancing a whisky on his knee, his chin buried in the folds of his keffiyeh, kept his gaze on the glowing embers. "I expect so. Would you care to accompany me?"

The invitation surprised him. "I didn't think it was allowed. The guides instructed us never to leave the camp, especially after dark. Even after dinner they escort

us back to our tents.”

Colin shrugged. “You are paying a great deal of money for this adventure, Doctor. I will speak to Justice. We shall take the necessary precautions.” He turned to Sylvie. “Perhaps you would care to come as well. You would find it interesting. Exciting, I should think. The Serengeti is an entirely different world at night. There are as many eyes glowing around you as there are stars shining above. Your senses become keener in the dark. The slightest sound ignites your imagination. The slightest touch, whether it’s a breeze tugging at your blouse or your companion brushing up against you, sends your blood racing, your heart pounding, everything quivering with the expectation of danger and ultimately glorious release.”

Robert waited for Sylvie’s reply, thinking about what it would be like to walk alone into the dark, straight into the roars and yelps and trumpeting that pierced the pooling black night, to leave the safety of lights and voices and everything he knew behind. To go to a place where the slow slide could not follow.

But she stood abruptly and said curtly, “Maybe tomorrow.” She put her hand on Robert’s shoulder. “I’m going to turn in. Coming?”

Imani, as if by magic, was suddenly standing right behind them. The Maasai held his warrior’s spear in one hand, a flashlight in the other. He waited for Robert to join her then began walking toward their tent, his footsteps silent on the matted trail, training the beam behind him so they could stay within the pale wafer of safety as another member of the camp wordlessly brought up the rear, a rifle slung over his shoulder.

When they reached their tent, Sylvie unzipped the bug screen and bid their escorts the traditional Swahili wish for sweet dreams. “*Lala salama*,” she said.

A single bulb hanging from the ceiling gave the tent a candlelight glow. They undressed and slipped between the freshly laundered sheets that still held the warmth of the sun under which they had dried. Robert went over his bird list, racing the dimming light as the charge drained from its solar-powered battery.

“What did you make of Colin’s offer?” he asked as he silently counted and recounted the checkmarks, questioning their accuracy as if a faulty pen stroke could be to blame for the bird sightings he could not recall.

Sylvie lay on her side, her face turned toward him, the red Maasai blanket humped like the savannah’s termite mounds that had been rounded by wind and rain. “I really didn’t give it much thought.”

“His invitation sounded genuine enough.”

“I’m sure it was.” Her voice sounded weary.

“It would be an incredible experience. The highlight of the trip.”

“Uh huh,” she murmured.

“Good. Then it’s settled. You’ll go tomorrow night.”

“Me?” That brought her to an elbow. “What are you talking about?”

“Colin said he could guarantee your safety. He’s a good man. I trust him.”

Exasperation weighed her sigh. “And you think I’d go by myself, without you.”

“I think you should go. I want you to. Besides, there’s no chance for me to see a pale chanting in the dark.”

“That’s no excuse and you know it,” she said.

Robert paused and took a breath as he faced down the lie. “All right. You know I can’t. The Sundowners.”

He said it matter-of-factly, applying another sobriquet to take the sting out of the disorienting syndrome that struck after darkness fell, when all the reference points that guided him clicked off like the instrument gauges in a cockpit. Last night he had awakened to find Sylvie straddling him, her thighs pinning his hips, her fingers clamping his wrists to the mattress. Her lips were inches from his, her breath coming in loud, labored gasps as she held him down. He could feel the heat coming off her like the afternoon gusts that sent the grasslands galloping, could feel the quickening thump of her heart. But what he could not feel was himself inside her, her warm sex around his. And then he heard the echo of a voice he did not recognize, the pleading angry, the words ringing with frustration. *Let me go. I just want to go downstairs and get a snack, watch some TV. Let me go, dammit.*

Robert’s blunt admission left no room for pretending. Sylvie raised her chin. “All the more reason why I won’t go, can’t go.”

He put the bird list down, adopted Colin’s accent: “We shall take the necessary precautions, I should think. Imani and his spear, me and my, well, you shall find it fascinating.”

The corners of Sylvie’s frown turned slightly. Encouraged, Robert kept at it, seeing her now like he did all those years ago when they had first met. It was at some civic event or a fundraiser or a lecture, he couldn’t remember which, but what he couldn’t forget, hoped never to forget, was how he couldn’t take his eyes off her, how beautiful her smile, how she laughed at the little jokes he made across the table, how afterward she told her friends it was his humor, not hormones, that had swept her off her feet.

He went back to his own voice, going for a playful tone. “You needn’t worry about me. I’ll wear my reading headlamp all night long and keep both flashlights on. I’ll tie my ankles to the bed with my belt. The worst that can happen is I get up and trip and get a bloody lip. They’ll find me trussed up in the morning, start a whisper campaign about the San Franciscans who are into B and D.”

Sylvie laughed, but the longer he went on the more her eyes and smile began to leak. She was so tired, so awfully tired. It was all she could do to pat him on the shoulder and wish themselves *lala salama*, as if such things were still possible.

In the morning Justice had the camp waterboy rouse the camp earlier than usual. An enormous herd of wildebeest was crowding the savannah, the smell of the Mara River causing the animals to close ranks and gather speed, the air

thickening with the sounds of pounding hooves and panicky bullfrog-like grunts.

“You like this river crossing very much,” Justice said as they ate a hurried breakfast of biscuits and marmalade, rushing to load into the Land Cruisers. “This crossing very *National Geographic*.”

The drivers took the dirt track faster than usual to get ahead of the herd. Imani rode up front with Justice to keep an eye out for lions. A herd on the move brought out all the predators. Sylvie sat between Robert and Colin in the backseat, the three bracing against each other as the speeding Land Cruiser pitched and yawed. Dust motes danced on the sunlight streaming through the open roof, but no one dared speak lest the bouncing cause them to bite their tongues. They crested a rise and the brown waters of the Mara roiled below. Justice parked the royal blue four-by on a decline to give them a birds-eye view. The other vehicles pulled alongside. The river looked to Robert like a python undulating through the tall grass.

“Look,” Justice said, his usual deliberateness giving way to hurry. “The wildebeest coming very fast now. You say a stampede, yes?” He nodded to himself. “You like this stampede very much.”

Sylvie stood on the seat. Robert joined her. So did Colin. The photographer set a black nylon bag filled with grains of uncooked rice on the edge of the opened roof and used it as a makeshift brace for his telephoto lens. Within moments they were surrounded by snorting animals, the herd moving like the river itself, forking around the three vehicles then merging back into a single, unstoppable flow. There was no hesitation now. Even if the lead animals wanted to stop, they could not, for the powerful surge behind them pushed relentlessly onward. The brown water churned as the first wildebeest leapt off the bank. More followed. The rapids swept some downstream. Others were shoved underwater as new jumpers landed on top. Cauldrons frothed and water mushrooms sprouted as unblinking crocodiles grabbed flailing legs and pulled their victims under. Those lucky enough to make it across scrambled up a steep, muddy bank. It was a pandemonic scrum. Hooves twisted. Legs snapped. Ribs cracked.

“Reminds me of the lemmings I photographed in Lapland,” Colin said above the whine of his camera’s motor drive and the pitiful bleats of panicking animals. “An uncontrollable rush to the end. As fascinating as it was frightening.” And then he did what he always did on game drives and around the camp, turned his lens on Sylvie and snapped away.

For more than an hour the herd kept coming. Robert scanned the Kenyan side of the river. The vast plain was filling fast with thousands of wildebeest. Those that had made it safely across lost little time shoving their bearded muzzles into the lush green grass. Not a single creature, not one, ever looked back, and Robert marveled at how such a momentous event that meant the difference between life and death could be forgotten so quickly.

As the sun grew hotter the flow of wildebeest slowed to a trickle as the old and hobbling tried to keep up. One stumbled close by, knocking into the front fender of the Land Cruiser. Twin trails of snot dripped from its nostrils. Sickly yellow foam flecked its beard. Its eyes were rolled back, the wheezing animal lurching like a drunkard.

“What happened to him?” Ligget called from the open roof of his vehicle. He and

Matsui were standing, their wives sitting inside. "He ain't gonna make it."

Justice had his window down. "This wildebeest has nagana. He bit by tsetse fly."

"Well, hell, then somebody oughta shoot him," the Texan said. "Put the poor bastard out of his misery. That's what we'd do back home."

Text books scrolled through Robert's mind, slides from a distant lecture flashed. "I thought wild animals were immune to sleeping sickness," he said.

"Yes, this is correct mostly." The guide glanced at Imani. "But this wildebeest he eat the grass close to Maasai cattle eating the grass. This cattle sacred to Maasai, but tsetse bite Maasai cattle and many die from nagana until the end of time."

Ligget shook his head. "We got a gun for lions in the truck, right? Somebody oughta use it. If it was me? I'd take a bullet over drowning or gettin' eaten by gators any damn day of the week. Am I right, Doc? Ya'll with me, Papparazzi?"

Justice spoke before either could answer. "This journey is this wildebeest journey. This journey end the way it supposed to end. Here in Tanzania or there in Kenya. In the water or in the belly of crocodile. This wildebeest journey not for us to decide."

He started the engine and slowly backed up, moving away from the sick creature. When they were clear of it, he turned around and followed the track back to camp.

After lunch they retired to their tents to wait out the heat of the day. Sylvie requested a shower and the camp waterboy fetched a five-gallon pail warmed on the kitchen fire. He attached it to a rope strung through a pulley and hoisted it to the top of the shower stall, a tarped enclosure attached to the back of their tent and accessible through a zippered pass-through. Then he deftly tipped the pail so it filled a basin affixed to a gravity-fed showerhead.

"This shower water ready," he sang out.

"*Asante sana*," Sylvie sang back.

Robert was stretched out on the red Maasai blanket going over his bird list. Sylvie undressed and placed her clothes on the foot of the bed. "Come help me wash my hair," she said.

Even in the shadowy light he could make out the *nevus flammeus* on her left thigh, a small port wine stain the shape of the Little Dipper. He reached over and traced it with his fingertip. "My guiding star," he whispered.

Over the years the line had become a private joke and she gave the automatic roll of the eyes. "Why Doctor, I just need some help rinsing out the shampoo."

They squeezed into the tarp-walled stall, standing on a wooden grate. He pulled the dangling cord and released just enough water to wet them, saving the rest for rinsing. They soaped up then Robert took a travel-sized plastic bottle of shampoo and squeezed some on Sylvie's scalp, combing her thick tendrils with

fingers that once wielded scalpels, patched patients' hearts, removed tumors, but were now powerless to fix the disease growing inside his brain. She tilted her head, raised her face to the African sky, and moaned with pleasure as he worked in the shampoo. He knew her eyes were shut, her lips parted, her tongue pressed against the back of her teeth. They knew each other as well as two people could and he realized that's what he would miss most of all.

"Colin is going on a photo safari tonight," he said. "He told me there's bound to be plenty of cats looking for stragglers. Not just lions, but the smaller, harder to see ones. Servals, civets, and, and..." He halted, the name as slippery as the bar of soap.

"Caracals," she prompted.

"Yes, those, too." He was unable to keep the frustration from his voice. "You're going, right?"

Sylvie turned around, her eyes flashing with impatience. "Why is this so important to you? You're being very controlling, you know, just like you are at the hospital. With everything."

"Because..." He hesitated, struggling with the words, slapped the side of his head. "Because I can't control this."

The echo in the tiny stall wrapped them tighter than the plastic walls and Sylvie started to cry. "It's so unfair. *Je déteste. Je déteste.*"

Robert slipped his arms around her, tucked her head beneath his chin. They stood there rocking gently, Robert keeping to himself what 20 years of practicing medicine had taught him, that healing always involved a combination of skill and luck, but when it came to surviving, fairness never entered the equation. He pulled the cord and released the rest of the water. It fell like warm rain, washing the soap and shampoo and tears down their bellies, down their legs, down through the slats in the wooden grate where it all disappeared into the black earth below.

Clouds bunched over the savannah in the late afternoon and the air turned skittish as thermals rose and dust devils careened across the plain. Gusts sent the tents billowing like lungs and the laundry hanging on lengths of manila rope tied between pairs of yellow fever trees whipped and snapped. Robert and Sylvie joined the others having four o'clock tea before the usual pre-dinner game drive. The dining steward apologized for not having any freshly baked cakes to go along with their coffee and Earl Grey, explaining that the cook couldn't risk lighting a fire beneath his cast-iron potjie.

"I think it's too windy to leave camp," Mrs. Custodie said, her eyebrows twitching.

"Yeah, we're tired of looking at dumb animals," her daughter said.

"Okay, we won't go," said the father.

"Count us out, too" Ligget said. "We'll take a pass on feeding the skeeters." He pantomimed to the Matsuis to join them for cocktails and cards.

Colin turned to Sylvie and Robert. "The wind will die down by tonight. We shall be going out after dark anyway. Do you wish to wait until then?"

Robert hesitated. "What about it, Justice? Is it worth going now?"

The head guide cradled his bone china cup as if it were an egg. "This wind very good for bird watching. They do not fly high in this sky. You like this wind very much."

"Because there's a good chance I'll find my pale chanting?"

"It is always possible, but it is up to the chanting."

"That settles it. I'll go now."

"Then so will I," Sylvie said.

Robert touched her arm. "Why don't you wait for the night safari?"

She glanced at Colin then back at him. "I can do both."

He paused then nodded. "Okay. Both it is."

The photographer shrugged. "If the birds are out now, I should come to. Who knows what we might find."

The Custodies' son stomped his feet, held his silver camera out like a gun. "If Colin's going then I'm going, too. You can't stop me."

His parents went into overdrive first cajoling then threatening, but after awhile they gave in and agreed he could go as long as Imani went to watch after him.

Justice led the way to the lone Land Cruiser and they loaded up, the young boy sitting between Colin and Sylvie with the Maasai in the jump seat behind. Robert rode up front with Justice. A new track took them away from the Mara River and across a desolate tableland where the grass had already been grazed and the stubble charred by lightning strikes. Robert began to doubt Justice's choice of routes. Nothing appeared to be alive, nothing seemed to be moving except the wind and dust. The soil was the color of ash punctuated by heaps of bleached wildebeest bones. They passed a single horn still attached to a gazelle skull pointing straight up. It reminded him of a stick of driftwood he once spent hours trying to pull from the sand in front of his family's beach house, pretending it to be Excalibur, not knowing that it was the tip of a water-logged limb buried by a high tide.

Heat haze melted the horizon and the blue silhouette of a far-off mountain range hovered over a wavering lake that didn't exist. Thunder rolled in the distance. Robert could hear Sylvie and Colin chatting behind him, he saying he knew the city in Provence where she had been born, had gone there on a photo assignment, she saying she would love to visit New Zealand someday and asked if there were any similarities between the Maoris and the Maasai.

They were driving straight into the sun and Robert cursed himself for having forgotten his sunglasses. He squinted and turned his head, but the rays still found him, forcing his eyes closed. Red spots flamed behind the lids and he was powerless to blink or rub them away. He heard his father all these years gone

warning him not to stare at an eclipse. He saw the red insides of the first chest he ever cracked, a heart pumping lazily between layers of yellow coronary fat, blood oozing from a loosened clamp, blood draining from the face of a wife, a husband, a mother, a father standing in the waiting room as he delivered bad news about their loved one. He saw Sylvie's mouth with blood red lipstick whispering *je t'aime*.

The sun beat down. The motor droned. The front seat throbbed. And Robert felt himself falling backward through a red hole darkening into violet then blackness. The light faded and with it the details he clung to: his mother's touch, his boyhood adventures, the thrill of saving his first life, Sylvie's wedding dress, his life list of birds. The fall was finally broken by a noisy jolt and a sharp jab. He opened his eyes. The Land Cruiser had taken a hard turn, hitting a pothole, throwing him against the door. His head hurt and his limbs felt thick and heavy. He looked groggily at the driver, but the man was concentrating on keeping to the rutted track as the ashy soil turned stony, the burnt stubble giving over to thorny scrub. A silver jackal darted in front. A blue agama lizard performed pushups on a tombstone of black rock glinting with flint. A lone acacia tree led to another and then another and finally to a gathering of shiny trunks, their entwining limbs locked in embrace.

The driver took his bare foot off the gas, but did not apply the brakes. He turned the ignition off and they quietly rolled to a stop.

"Ahead in this tree," he whispered. "Twelve on the clock."

Robert instinctively raised his binoculars at the black branches etched against a flat and colorless sky. "What is it?" he whispered back. "What am I looking for?"

"This bird which you wish."

He strained against the rubber eyecups, clumsily fingering the focus wheel. And then he remembered as the glass filled with piercing yellow eyes looking right back through a mask of gray feathers. Finally, his pale chanting goshawk. And a male, too. Robert held his breath as he locked eyes with the creature, afraid that even the sound of his pulse would scare it off. How perfectly it was built to live free in the wild. Strong enough to fly, light enough to float. A cunning predator and equally as cunning when it came to propagating its kind.

It was the bird that broke off the stare-down. The goshawk swiveled his head owl-like, peered at the ground, and pushed off on long, red legs. His white and dark gray barred belly blinking as he wheeled on black-tipped wings. Diving swiftly, his sharp talons outstretched, he plucked a striped ground squirrel scurrying across a pebbly clearing. The wind kicked up and sent clouds of twigs and dirt spinning like tops, but the pale raptor did not falter. With the plump prize now hanging limp in his clutch, he flapped his powerful wings and climbed.

Robert swiveled his binoculars to track the bird's flight, but the windshield's thick frame blocked his view. He yanked open the heavy door and scrambled out, leaving the safety of the vehicle behind, unmindful of stepping into a world of predator and prey, unmindful of the voices calling him to come back to safety, listening only for the chant of the pale bird. He would not be denied now. He had searched for it for so long, wanted it, needed it.

The chase took him across the clearing, hurdling clumps of dried red grass, crashing through thickets of thornbush as the goshawk led him. On the far side

of the clearing, the bird slowed and circled the crown of a tall flat-topped acacia. Arching his wings and dropping his tail, he hovered in mid air then settled down on the edge of a nest made of braided twigs and dried grasses fastened atop a fanning branch. A pair of similarly plumed birds greeted the hunter with shrieks, a female and another male. And though Robert couldn't see into their nest, he was sure it held two blue eggs more fragile than bone china tea cups. The hunter held out the striped ground squirrel to the female as the other male blinked his yellow eyes then bobbed his head approvingly. Robert watched as she split open the fat rodent's furry belly with her blood red beak and ate. As she did, her mates began to chant.

The warm Serengeti wind carried the haunting duet down from the treetop and across the clearing. Robert closed his eyes as the notes swirled around him, spinning him, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until they lifted him off the ancient ground. The chant carried him up, level to the branches of the trees, and then higher. He was soaring now, circling like his precious birds, above the plains, above the flat-topped acacias. He looked down and saw his shadow, saw the Land Cruiser, saw the man in the front seat looking on wisely, saw the man in the red blanket looking out for danger, saw the man and the beautiful woman standing in the middle, their shoulders touching. She was boosting up a child so he could look out the open roof, too, and through the long lens of a camera that the man held steady for him. The boy was asking questions and the woman was answering patiently, her voice mingling with the chanting of the goshawks, telling him not to be afraid, that they were not ghost hawks, but a family.

Robert drifted past, his shadow slipping into the gathering dusk, and there among a pale chanting, there beneath the African sky, he finally saw what would be.

Dwight Holing is the author of *A Boatload* (Jackdaw Press, 2014) and *California Works: Stories* (Snake Nation Press, 2013). His award-winning short stories and essays have appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Cutthroat*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Phoebe*, and *Oregon Quarterly*, among others. His nonfiction work can be read in *Audubon*, *Discover*, and *Outside*, and in books published by Macmillan, Random House, and University of California Press. For more information, visit dwiththoling.com and follow him @DwightHoling.

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