

African Safari

“Do you all see the leopard in the sausage tree?” Mussa called out. Each of his six passengers had taken a window seat in the safari minibus.

“Hey, Mussa, can you stop so we can take pictures?” Abbie asked. In today’s seat rotation she had the catbird seat next to the driver.

“*Hakuna matata*,” Mussa said, the Swahili phrase for “no problem.”

A column of dust swirled around the minivan as Mussa pulled off the road. Lou Puccino snapped photos through his open window, but across the aisle his wife Sara slammed hers down. “Dust! I’ve had enough to last me the rest of my life. I’ve got African real estate in my hair, up my nose, and in my mouth.”

Bea Patton, sitting behind Sara, tapped her shoulder. “Sleeping any better these nights?”

“Why do you ask?” Sara snapped without turning around.

“I heard you took a walk down the hall in our Nairobi hotel.”

“Who told you that?”

“A little bird,” Bea said.

Sara glared at her husband across the aisle. Lou leaned over and whispered to his wife. “Karl Patton told me he saw you in the hall. Sleepwalking. Guess he’s got a big mouth.”

From the back of the minibus, Karl called out, “Mussa, aren’t you afraid you’ll be fined for pulling off the road?”

“We’ll be outta here before the warden gets anywhere near us. I can spot his bus a mile off.”

“I wish he *would* catch us. Maybe we could go home then. This barbaric trip has no appeal for me.” Sara opened the notebook she always carried.

Abbie's sidekick, Lacy, sat in the seat in front of Sara. The two girls had just graduated from college, and this safari was a gift from their parents. Lacy turned around and asked, "What are you writing, Mrs. Puccino?"

"Notes about the trip."

"Wanna share any of them?"

Sara smiled a rare smile. "Okay, since you asked. Here's a short one."

Oh marvelous long-necked giraffe,  
Do you drink your beer from a tall carafe?

Everyone laughed. When Lacy begged for more, Sara said, "I'll read one."

Amboseli  
The cynic who doubts that here  
mercy seldom falls as gentle rain  
has only to point to whitened skulls  
and mirages on this tortured plain.

"Man, that's heavy," Lacy said.

As Mussa turned to point out a Thompson gazelle, the minibus hit a pothole and everyone bounced up.

Abbie leaned over to the driver. "You watch the road, I'll look for game. You know, Mussa, all I need is a really good sun tan, and I could do your job."

The good-natured African laughed.

The next morning Sara Puccino told her husband that she wasn't going on the game drive that day. "It's rained all night, and it looks like more of the same. I'll consult my field guide for African animals, thank you very much."

Lou shook his head and groaned in disgust. “I’ve spent a bundle on this trip, and you’re bored silly all the time. Shoulda left you at home, bitch.”

“Too bad you didn’t. It’s been a rotten excursion.”

Later that morning a bright sun dispersed the rain clouds, and the other five safari members piled into the minibus, eager for the game drive. A few miles down the road Mussa pulled off to let everyone have a good look at two lionesses ambling along with their three cubs. As he started to pull away, the wheels spun in the mud. He got out of the van to assess the problem.

Lou poked his head out the window. “I’ll bet a couple of us could push the van out.”

“No thanks. Those lady lions are touchy about their cubs and might have you for breakfast.”

Mussa climbed back in the van and radioed for another vehicle. While they waited he pointed out the wildlife parade in the ravine below. A secretary bird perched on a tree branch, two giraffes browsed in treetops for a while before ambling on, and vervet monkeys leaped from limb to limb in the trees. Next, Mussa taught his passengers a song praising good warriors, “Tyacampa.” When they tired of singing, he went out to pick some white mango flowers for the ladies.

He handed Abbie one. “Smell this,” he said.

“I can’t,” she replied. “I’ve still got a buggered-up nose. From yesterday’s dust.”

Lou asked, “Mussa, those lady lions might still be around. Weren’t you afraid they’d attack you when you were outside?”

The driver grinned. “No, I’m too tough for them. But seriously, lions do attack people.”

“And kill them?” Lou continued.

“Yes sir, they do.”

. . .

That afternoon Lou Puccino swam a few laps in the pool and then climbed out, grunting and blowing. As he toweled himself, he glanced at Abbie and Lacy, stretched out on deck chairs next to him, their slim bodies clad in bikinis and covered with sun tan lotion.

On his left, Bea Patton slapped sun block on her pale, pudgy legs. “Good swim?”

“You bet! But cold. The sun’s supposed to heat the pool, but it doesn’t. Not by a long shot.”

“I never swim.” Bea giggled, as she patted her bottle-blond curls. “Messes up my hair.”

“What a crackerjack place,” Lou said. “Masineri Camp on the Massai Mara. Great food. Big spread here—big like everything in Africa.”

Bea sighed. “And Africa’s filled with big lions and big elephants.”

“Yeah, I got a dozen shots of the wildebeest herd at the Ngorongoro Crater last week. And good shots of those lions later. They were paying us no never mind. Not thinking of eating us at all.”

“Wasn’t that balloon ride yesterday morning marvelous? Too bad Sara didn’t go.”

“Africa isn’t her thing.” Lou looked at the red-brown stone building behind them. “Sun’s almost over the yardarm. I’m having a bloody Mary before dinner. In the lounge. Anyone else?”

No one cared to join him. As Lou got to his feet, Sara came clop-clopping along on her high-heeled shoes, pausing beside her husband. “You’d best get in your laps and trim down that gut.”

“Already been in. More’n you can say.” He glared at her.

“See you later,” Sara called back, sailing on in her long red-and orange flowered skirt and a billowing orange blouse.

“Lucky me,” Lou shot back.

At the lavish dinner buffet Lou heaped his plate with food and slid into the booth with Karl and Bea Patton. “I guess Sara has already gone to the lounge for after dinner coffee.”

He was returning from the dessert table with trifle, chocolate mousse, and a strawberry tart piled on a plate, when his wife came by. “At the trough again, blubber boy?”

“Quit needling me. I’ll diet when I get home,” he growled.

“You’ll have to or you’ll die,” she flung back as she swept out of the dining room.

Lou winced. He knew Doc Kelly was gonna blow his top when he got home. When he got home! Life would be beautiful if only Sara weren’t going with him. God, how he hated her.

The next morning Sara asked, “Finally awake, slugabed?”

Lou watched her slip a blue batik cover-up over her bikini. “Better go on the game drive this morning? It’s our last one.”

“No, I’ve had enough of African fauna, so charmingly termed as “game.” I’m glad this is the last stop on this dreadful safari. This is the worst accommodation we’ve had so far. This is the finest money can buy? A primitive tent surrounded by wild animals!”

“Primitive? It’s clean. With a permanent roof and a private bathroom? Right next to a lily pond? What the fuck do you want, for God’s sake?”

“You and your vulgar language!” She snatched her notebook and stalked out, her sandals flapping on the stone walkway to the wooden bridge arching over the lily pond.

Lou heard a commotion outside and got up to check it out. A troop of black-faced vervet monkeys, their long tails arched, scampered across the bridge. They wrestled and tumbled among the cyprus shrubs on the bank of the pond. He grabbed his camera from the tent and snapped a few photos before he went in to shower. As he shaved in the steamy bathroom, he opened and stiffened his wide mouth, scraping around it. He grimaced at his image in the mirror. Once Sara had called him a frog. Then she just had to add, “Our first kiss certainly did not turn you into prince charming.”

Once upon a time they had truly been in love. In college he'd been the macho football hero girls flocked around. Then he'd hooked up with the "homecoming queen." Oh, and the "honor student." Clearly opposites—Beauty and the Beast—some called them, they'd been attracted to each other then. But it hadn't lasted. Why was their marriage on the rocks? They had money; he'd done all right in real estate in Las Vegas. In fact, he'd done damn good.

Fifty now, Sara had kept her looks, her fine airs, her fucking superiority. She pecked away on the word processor keyboard all the time, and occasionally a magazine published one of her articles or poems. On this trip she had constantly scribbled, and had already filled one notebook.

"How can you find so much to write about?" he'd asked her.

"It's my way of photographing Africa." She smiled archly. "Not nearly as expensive as developing two thousand photos."

As he dressed, he wondered, did she ever write about him? Her first notebook was on her night table. After he dressed in safari shirt and shorts, he sat on her cot and flipped through it.

### Amboseli Song Cycle

Death leaps up in a cymbal crash,  
the sun glares red through ribs picked clean,  
jackals singing jangled tunes, vultures clash,  
jawbone quarter-note rests,  
half-note eyes plucked out,  
zebra hide of muted strings—  
in the African night of deep, dark dreams.

Tympani bursts of breaking day,  
polyphonic birdsong lifts night's pall,  
punctuates the theme of dust and clay,  
playful pizzicato plucking,  
trumpet fanfare, grassland reeds,  
tuneful song sweeps over the earth,  
circadian jubilation at day's rebirth.

“Jibberish!” he muttered, thumbing through the notebook. No mention of him or anyone else on the safari. Just a bunch of the same shit. Dammit, she wasn’t gonna any more notebooks, if he could help it. He headed to the lodge for breakfast with a smile on his face. He had an idea.

That night moonlight shafted through the tent window, lighting up Sara’s bed. She was sleeping restlessly, but would she get up and wander around?

His heart pounding, he wondered and waited . . .

He’d been damn clever. Alcohol usually triggered her sleepwalking, and for their farewell dinner he’d ordered a bottle of an African wine she fancied. During the evening she’d downed three glasses, two over her usual limit. The last bit of his preparation was to leave their tent flap unzipped and pinned up, so that when she slipped out the zipper noise wouldn’t awaken her.

He waited . . .

Yes! At last. Her eyes fixed in a glassy stare, Sara, in white silk pajamas, walked to the open tent flap and stepped out. Sara in deepest Africa in silk pajamas. Can you beat that? Now she’s out there with all those fierce lions and vicious baboons! It was bound to happen now. Lou, old boy, you’ve done it.

He listened uneasily. Baboons were squabbling somewhere. And other hungry critters were bound to be prowling around. Those signs posted on the compound border warned guests about dangerous animals. Guards were posted around the compound to see that no one wandered outside at night.

Lou wondered, at what point on the safari did I decide to do this? Do this? Murder my wife? God, I don’t have to do a thing. She’ll do it all. Damn, I just have to wait . . .

A shrill scream pierced the night. Oh God, it has happened! But he hadn't planned on the screaming. Had anyone else heard? Should he go out? Not yet. Wait.

Lou heard sobbing. He leaped out of bed, his heart somersaulting as he envisioned a lion ripping her flesh. Bright red blood spurting on white silk. God, I can't stand it. What the hell was I thinking? Hurry! Hurry! He clambered over the bridge and ran up the path toward the lodge. Then he heard yelling. Panting, he whirled around to look across the gully. People in pajamas pouring from their tents. A light bobbing along the path. A camp guard leading Sara back to their tent.

She's alive? But why had she screamed! Had she tried to go in the wrong tent? Scared people and then woke up and screamed? That must be it. God, I must get back down there fast.

Lou ran down the path toward the pond. . . . Panting. . . . One hand clutching his chest . . . There's Sara standing by the bridge, cheering me on, just like at Grant Stadium. I sure can run, all right. Lou Puccino, the great running back! No one even close to me! Only a few yards more to go. Straight through the posts for a touchdown. . . . Oh God! This pain!

The Masineri Camp guard pounded back to the pond, where a crowd had gathered. His flashlight picked out a body floating face down among the lily pads. He and another guest waded in and tugged the limp form onto the bank and began pumping the man's chest. They soon gave up. He was gone. That nutty lady in white pajamas he'd just taken back to her tent was standing beside the pond.

"It's my husband," she announced. "Lou had a dicey heart. I suppose he's had a heart attack." She picked a cypress flower from a shrub behind her and lifted it to her nose.