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## NGORONGORO

JANE WAS ALL ABOUT the Maasai. Middle of Ngorongoro Crater, every animal you dreamed of as a kid—the whole damn cast of the *Lion King*—lined up in front of you like items in a grocery store, but wild, you know, no fences, no one stopping them from tearing each other apart (which they do sometimes—we saw the bones) and Jane was just sitting there, glazed over. Thinking about the Maasai, I'm sure. That was the deal: I get the safari and Jane gets the Maasai.

Back in middle school everyone in our class was told to pick a favourite book and argue in support of it. Eighteen of us picked *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, three picked *A Wrinkle in Time*, and Jane picked *The White Masai*. Jane put together a full Maasai woman's outfit for the debate: the checkered cloth, disk necklace, earrings, everything. She even taught us a few words in the Maasai language. She won by a landslide and I bragged all day that she was my best friend.

After she graduated from university, Jane filed away *The White Masai* and never talked about it. But she had a coffee-table book of Maasai photos—you know, Maasai grinding corn and making things with beads and decorating themselves for ceremonies. And jumping, of course. That was the big thing for the Maasai, it seemed, jumping up and down with great green vistas behind them. And maybe the photographer got a giraffe or a zebra in the background to complete the scene. Those were Jane's favourites, I think. Sometimes I'd come by her place and the book would be open to one of those photos, a big two-page spread, a window through which she could catch a glimpse as she putzed around doing chores or packing for the trip. Sometimes I thought of it as a two-way mirror, those Maasai guys looking up from their verdant emerald valley at Jane's ceiling, occasionally seeing her blur by with an armful of laundry or jiggling a new set of triple-As into her headlamp.

Anyway, she left that book—those guys—at home, staring up at the ceiling or maybe folded into the darkness, examining one another—and

bought a new one. A pocket book with fewer pictures, but more facts. She read it cover to cover on the plane, every once in a while putting in on her lap with her thumb marking the page and her mouth telling me some new fact. I thought she was done with it once we touched down, but then I'd see her flipping through it in our hotel room or on the bus to Arusha or, even once, during the safari. It was while we were waiting for the lions to fuck.

Lions, it turns out, fuck only once a year, but when they do they do it every fifteen minutes for days. So that was good for us, you know. Our guide spotted them from across the crater. It wasn't hard—they'd decided to fuck by the side of the vehicle path and a cluster of 4x4s had already settled in to watch. We were maybe the fifth to arrive. Who knows how long they'd been going at it by then, but they looked tired. They both lay there, splayed out on the grass, the male's tail flopping slowly—not so much back and forth as around.

“Fifteen minutes, max,” our guide said. “Get your cameras ready!”

That's when I turned to Jane, to make sure her camera was ready, and she had her nose buried in the Maasai book. I smacked her on the shoulder and she put down the book and idled up to the window. Someone in the next 4x4 started singing “Can You Feel The Love Tonight?” and we were all laughing, even Jane. Then maybe five or six minutes later, it happened. There must have been a dozen 4x4s gathered by now, the last couple arriving just in time. The male lion got up very slowly as if each bone was cracking into place at the joints, and lugged his way over to the female, who didn't react until he had her by the base of the tail with his mouth and was hauling her up. It lasted about twenty seconds and then everyone cheered. Jane went back to her book. It was 3:30 p.m. and by 4:00 we were supposed to be at the Maasai village.

We climbed the crater slowly, which is all you can do. It had rained a bit and the 4x4 slipped in places, which was mostly fun and a little bit terrifying. But by 4:10 we'd made it to the rim and were pulling into the Maasai Cultural Centre. There were so many of them—thirty maybe—milling around or chatting with a couple of tourists who had arrived before us. One of them came out of the cloud of red-and-black cloth and greeted us. His name was Samuel and he was from the village, though he was currently on holidays from his studies in Dar Es Salaam. We were to pay him fifteen dollars. Each. I looked at Jane and Jane looked at me as we tucked our hands into our pants and fiddled at our money belts.

The first thing Samuel did was take us to a hilltop overlooking a huge plain. The rain from earlier had cleared and holes were opening in the clouds. Light pooled on the grasses. It was something. Then all of the thirty-odd Maasai gathered in front of us for the welcoming dance. I couldn't believe it! It was the same scene as in Jane's coffee table book, except now we were in it. I grabbed Jane's arm and shook it hard, looking at her with my eyes bugging out. Everyone was singing, and the men were hopping and everything. *Can you believe it?* I said with my eyes, and Jane smiled. Then Samuel invited us to join in! I went down to join the women but Jane mimed that she'd stay back to take pictures. One of the Maasai women put a beaded disk around my neck and showed me how to shrug my shoulders—which is basically no different from any other time you shrug your shoulders, except you do it rhythmically. *I dunno. I dunno. I dunno.*

I looked over at Jane and she was laughing, but I could tell something was wrong. Then I knew it—the hopping! I asked Samuel if women could hop with the men and he said “Of course!” so I motioned over to Jane.

“Jane, you can hop!” I told her. She looked at Samuel.

“Are you sure?” she asked, and he nodded. He took a ceremonial hopping stick from one of the men and handed it to Jane.

“But, can any woman do this, or just the tourists?”

“Oh, just the tourists!” laughed Samuel.

Jane looked at me a long time, and I said “Do it! Do it!” in rhythm with my shrugs. So she did. Everyone laughed. Even Jane smiled a bit while she was jumping up and down. I must have taken twenty pictures, at least. One of them looked so much like a picture in Jane's coffee table book it was crazy. The light the same, the clouds. The only difference was Jane there in the middle in her black Gore-Tex jacket instead of the checkered shoulder-cloth deal. I told myself I'd blow up a copy of it and slip it into her book one day to surprise her.

After the greeting, Samuel took us into his house. It was pitch black and smoky, but Samuel said our eyes would adjust and they did. Jane coughed a little from the smoke. Samuel explained the different parts of his house—the various bedrooms, shooting out like spokes from a wheel, and at the centre the little cooking area. He explained how each house had a bed for the chief, depending on which of his wives he wanted to sleep with. He explained that once he'd graduated from school in Dar Es Salaam he'd come back and build his own village nearby. Then he asked us if we had any questions. I looked

over at Jane and waited. She had told me her questions so many times I knew them by heart. But Jane was just sitting there, gazing down into the faint orange embers of the central fire.

“Nothing?” asked Samuel, so I sprang into action. I asked about the fifteen-year age sets and circumcision (male and female) and if they ever got attacked by a lion or hyena and what did they do? I asked about the cloth and the beads and how many Maasai still lived in the Conservation Area. I asked about their god, in Ol Doinyo Lengai, made of fire. Samuel answered each question with great interest. He complimented me on my knowledge and I said I’d learned it all from Jane, so he complimented her and she smiled into the fire. Then he said it was time to move on and soon enough we were outside in the marketplace.

Samuel tried to sell us some disk necklaces. He put a couple around our necks and quoted us a price. I offered him ten dollars less and he agreed. Samuel then led us back to our 4x4. Our guide was waiting inside, thumbing out a beat on the steering wheel. Just as we were climbing in, Jane turned to Samuel and said “*Ashe*.” His face beamed.

“*Ashe*,” he said. “You are a real Maasai! *Sere inna!*” and he shook her hand vigorously. Her neck disk bobbed around as he shook, and it made her look like one of those awkward wobbly birds running to build up the speed to take off. We drove away and Jane sat quietly studying the headrest of the seat in front of her. I’d say one or two things and she’d smile and look over at me and then back to the headrest. We were going fast, racing to make the park gates before sunset (no cars are allowed in the park after dark, to prevent rhino poaching), and we were bouncing around so much that there hardly seemed a point to trying to strike up conversation, anyway. I settled back and closed my eyes, and just as I did—*Wham!*—our driver slammed on the brakes.

“What? What?” I shouted. Our driver held his finger to his lips and with the other hand pointed into the bush. There, half-visible, was a young male lion. All the other cars must have missed it, speeding to make the gate.

“Chased off from the pride,” explained the guide. “He climbed up here to get away. To rest.”

Before I could grab my camera Jane was up with it pressed to her eye. We were only ten feet from the lion, and the camera had the zoom lens on, but Jane leaned out the window anyway, more and more, until the guide reached out and held her back with his forearm.

“Not so close,” he whispered, but she didn’t move. She strained against his limit, craned her neck to push the lens forward an extra inch. The lion sat there, staring down the barrel of the lens, but Jane wouldn’t take the shot. All three of them stayed like that—Jane leaning forward, the guide straining his arm against her, the lion staring back—for maybe ten, twenty seconds. The guide was getting restless, eyeing the dashboard clock. The lion turned its head slightly and fanned its paws through the leaves at its feet. I watched Jane push the button down and heard the shutter close, seal up that little seam of light, then open. One quick sound before the engine started up again.