

CHRISTOPHER MEADES

A BAD DAY FOR THE ZEBRAS

“DON’T EVER NAME ONE. It only makes it harder to send them on their way.” Cairo slapped the creature on its back and directed it towards the gates. He gazed at Thomas, allowed his eyes to linger and then returned to the herd. Thomas was left to stand next to the funnel-shaped, metallic enclosure. Above, the sound of helicopter blades cut through the dense heat of the Nairobi sky. He closed his eyes and listened closer. To the swoosh of each blade, the dim hum of the copter’s engine underneath, the sound of the herd stampeding towards the gates.

“Look sharp,” Cairo said. Thomas stepped back as another dozen animals charged his way.

He’d joined the mission six days ago, weeks after it began. For the better part of a month, Kenyan wildlife officials had been ferrying hundreds of zebras and wildebeest to a park in Kenya’s southernmost region. The mission, to an outsider, might sound humanitarian. The longest drought in twenty-six years had killed off eighty per cent of the region’s herbivores. Now the lions were starving and needed to be fed. It was the humane thing to do.

The truth, as Thomas knew it, is that the government would have been happy to let the lions die if only the kings of all beasts had been willing to go quietly. But they weren’t going without a fight. For months now, the lions had been venturing outside the borders of the Amboseli National Park to feast on anything made of warm flesh. Farmers’ livestock were the first to go. A few dogs were next. Last month a little boy lost a leg before his father shot the lioness as it tried to carry the child back to her cubs.

A father will do anything to protect his son.

A lioness will stop at nothing to feed her cubs.

“The situation is critical,” Cairo said last week when he met Thomas on the airport tarmac. “Make no mistake. This is about public relations. Important men care very much what we do here these next few days.”

Thomas looked at Cairo now, crying out orders to the teenage workers armed with whips and prods. Cairo's bronzed skin, wet with perspiration and toughened by years in the sun, was still lighter than the Kenyans'. His accent was difficult to place as well. Was it Middle Eastern? African? A mixture of both? Thomas braced himself for six more zebras, two of which were foals following their parents. Amid the crackle of whips and now-distant wail of helicopter blades, the animals, young and old, stampeded through the metal cylinder and into the massive truck bed waiting on the other side. Thomas stared into their glassy eyes as they passed, searching for something, anything—fear, trepidation, anger—to suggest they knew their fate.

“What's the count?” Cairo said.

“Thirty-nine.”

“Is there room for one more?”

Thomas stared down the long grey corridor. The zebras were a blur of black-and-white on the other side, each animal indistinguishable from the next. He couldn't see whether the parents had abandoned their young. In his ears, the sound of helicopter blades still rang. He looked up but couldn't find it in the sky. Thomas placed his hands to his ears. The ringing had been there for weeks, ever since he walked into that courtroom, ever since he stepped into that wooden box and said what he had to say.

“American!” Cairo yelled. “Is there any room?”

“Just enough for one more,” Thomas said. He opened the gate and sent another foal to its death.

“What about San Francisco? Have you been to San Francisco?”

“No.”

“Disneyland?”

Thomas shook his head.

“The Grand Canyon, then. You must have seen the Grand Canyon.”

“Only on television,” Thomas said.

Cairo broke into a half-smile, the first smile Thomas had seen these past six days. “You've lived almost fifty years and haven't seen much of your own land, American.”

“I grew up on Long Island,” Thomas said. “That's on the east coast. The places you're talking about are thousands of miles away.”

Cairo tore off a piece of bread and dipped it in the broth. Outside teenagers were whipping rocks against a sheet of metal. Each rock that

careened off the metal resonated like broken glass in Thomas's ears. Inside the tent smelled yellow and red, the heavy tang of curry having lingered for days. Thomas thought it would be cooler inside Cairo's little bunker, but still the heat sweltered. He shifted on his cushion, wiped his brow and tore off another piece of bread.

"Why zebras?" he said.

"Huh?"

"Why zebras? We're herding hundreds of zebras and hardly any wildebeest. I can't imagine a bunch of starving lions would be all that particular."

Cairo took another bite and chewed it slowly before answering. This man, ten years Thomas' junior, had a way of staring through him, like a statue with moving eyes. Was he trying to read Thomas? To understand him? Or was this all designed to make him squirm?

"The zebras' digestive system is like no other animal in the region. They can live on a scarce diet longer than any other herbivore."

"Long enough for the lions to catch them and eat them?"

Cairo nodded. "Until the rains return."

"What if the rains never return? What if nothing ever goes back to normal?"

Cairo gave him that stare again. "What do you see when you look at them?"

"The workers out there?"

"No. The zebras."

Thomas shook his head. "They don't seem to know what's going on. They're clueless. Like lemmings running off a cliff."

"You have to know where to look," Cairo said. "With the striped beasts it's all in the ears. The ears go up, it means the zebra is calm. The ears push forward, they're frightened. Angry, they push back. Not everything is hidden behind the eyes."

Thomas drank from his water. He stared down at his blue plastic bottle and took another sip, still wary of the water in this country.

"How long will you be here?" Cairo said.

"I'm not sure. Until the mission's over. Or until they send me someplace else, I guess."

"We had three Americans here a few weeks ago. All of them are gone now. Two had to go back to the States," Cairo said. "Men in suits took them away on a plane."

"Some trouble with the law?"

Cairo nodded. “The third man, he just walked away one day. Into town. Never came back.”

Thomas felt that same stare, the one waiting for him to make a mistake. He thought of that wood again, the way his hand slipped when it touched the waxed oak of the witness chair. “Do you hear that?” He brought his hand up to his ear, where the ringing throbbed like a beating heart.

“I think,” Cairo said, “those men were all running from something. The first two were running from what they’d done. But the third man, he was running from himself. He had a demon inside, a creature clawing its way out of his chest. He looked just like you, American. The way he stared at the ground, the way he hung his chin and rung his hands. He was broken long before he came to Kenya.”

“How do you not hear that?” Thomas said. He leaned back and peered out the tent’s entrance. The helicopter was nowhere in the sky.

Cairo tore off another piece of bread. He dipped it in the curry and turned it over to let the broth soak through. “Tomorrow night, we’ll go into town,” he said. “See if we can’t make you right. Get you a girl.”

The night sky was marbled with clouds off in the distance—soft, quiet, unmoving; not as an omen of rain but rather as a torment for the lions. In the week since Thomas arrived, the clouds had drifted through the region, hinting at the possibility of rain, but never opening their eyes to shed tears. They sat in an in-between state, not knowing whether to make their home or simply pass through in search of a better place.

Thomas sat in the jeep’s passenger seat outside the brothel. He’d been alone with his thoughts for thirty minutes now, the only light what trickled out the purple and red windows of the ramshackle building. Across the gravel road, patrons filtered in and out of a dance club. The sound of eighties disco music sprayed out into the midnight air. With each thump of bass, Thomas’ ears rang. He’d been afraid of a headache for days now, afraid to have a migraine in the dense heat of this land, afraid his vision might go with the sensation of spiders crawling around inside his brain. He covered his ears and leaned back, laying himself bare before the dangers of the Kenyan night.

Finally Cairo emerged from the front door of the brothel. When he saw Thomas, he broke into a gap-toothed grin. Cairo climbed in and steered the jeep along the gravel road and over a wooden bridge. “How was it?” he said.

“I couldn’t go through with it.”

Cairo gave him that same look.

“Watch the road,” Thomas said. “That girl was fourteen. I wasn’t about to have sex with a fourteen-year-old.”

“The younger the better,” Cairo said. “A young girl has no HIV. You’d be safe with her.”

“I still don’t think it’s safe.”

“You wear a condom. Even for a blowjob. Very safe,” he said. “You have to learn to live life, American. To love living life. To enjoy the simple things.”

As they rounded a corner and headed down the main road back to camp, the jeep’s headlights darted in and out off the hundreds of dead trees and occasional abandoned car on either side of the road.

“Where I come from, you get arrested for that,” Thomas said. “I would never ...”

Cairo’s hand slammed into Thomas’ jaw. The man’s fingers clawed over his mouth. Thomas didn’t know what was happening. It was sudden, unexpected. He reached up to move Cairo’s hand away, but it was locked there like iron. Thomas replayed his last few sentences in his head. Did he say something wrong? Was he not supposed to argue with this man?

“Shut up, American. You keep quiet.”

Cairo took his hand off Thomas’ face. The jeep slowed to a stop and now Thomas saw the blockade. A van was stopped in the middle of the road. Seven dark figures stood in front of the vehicle, machine guns strung over their shoulders. Thomas felt a twinge of panic. That ringing in his ears. The smell of oak from the witness chair.

“Are these rebels?” he whispered.

“There are no rebels in Nairobi,” Cairo said. “The government won’t allow it. These are thieves. The sons of farmers who can’t raise crops because of the drought.”

One of the youths, the tallest and thinnest of the group, approached the vehicle. He held his hand up to shield his eyes from the headlights and called out in Swahili. Cairo shut off the engine but left the headlights on. He stepped out of the jeep.

“I’m going to pay them for passage,” he said. “Whatever you do, don’t say anything. And don’t leave the car. You hear me, American? Don’t leave the car.” Thomas tried to grab Cairo’s arm, to convince him to stay, but Cairo pulled away. He walked thirty paces towards the youth. Thomas watched in silence as Cairo, now with a big smile on his face, reached out to shake the young man’s hand. The young man refused. He said something in Swahili

again, his tone brisk, his eyes shooting from Cairo to Thomas and back to Cairo again. Cairo moved his hands in a downward gesture to calm the boy. The rest happened so fast.

The youth pointed his gun towards the jeep, towards Thomas.

Cairo made some sort of joke and laughed, a nervous laughter this time.

The gun pointed at Cairo.

A shot rang out in the Nairobi sky.

Blood splattered in slow motion, drops of crimson clung to the air and crystallized in the headlights before crashing to the ground in a shower of red and white. Cairo fell over in a heap on the side of the road, victim of a single gunshot to the head. Two of the other thieves approached the youth who'd fired his rifle. An argument ensued in Swahili. Thomas sunk down in his seat in an effort to make himself invisible. In his ears the sound of helicopter blades cut the air. He sunk down even lower, tried to hide himself even further in this hidden land.

As quickly as it began, the yelling stopped and three sets of eyes turned towards him. Thomas thought back to what Cairo said. Don't leave the car. They were walking towards him now. Behind them, Cairo lay motionless. The men with guns were twenty feet away. Thomas looked to his left and then his right. The trees were black on either side. He had only seconds.

Thomas leapt out of the passenger seat and ran into the trees. He didn't look back, he just ran straight into the dark. Behind him the sounds of bullets whipped through the branches. Thomas tripped over something, a rock or piece of scrap metal. He wasn't sure. He stood up and kept running. Their screams echoed behind him. More bullets sailed through the air. His eardrums felt like they were going to explode, but Thomas ran as far and as long as he could.

Twenty minutes passed before he collapsed against a fence at the side of an empty field. Thomas wheezed, tears streamed down his face. He rolled over onto his back and coughed uncontrollably. Minutes went by before Thomas climbed to one knee. He made his way across the field and another one after that. His eyes adjusted to the moonlight as he headed west towards camp. After almost an hour, Thomas saw the fenced-in area where the zebras were waiting to be taken into the park. He glanced nervously at the road in the distance. Perhaps, he decided, it was best he wait until daylight before returning to camp.

The zebras were sleeping standing up. There were less than a hundred of them now. Just three days ago they numbered almost four hundred. The

rest had gone to slaughter. Thomas leaned against the fencepost and watched a male zebra sleeping, its foal leaning against its side. Those ears Cairo had told him about were standing up, soft and at peace.

A lioness will stop at nothing to feed her cubs.

A father will do anything to protect his son.

He rubbed his hand along the rough edge of the fencepost. That morning in New York was just seventeen days ago. Thomas had put on his best suit, driven to the courtroom, dozens of eyes had turned towards him as he entered that wooden box. There he placed his hand on the slippery oak and told the truth. His son Daniel was never with him on the night that girl was killed in the city. He hadn't seen his son for days, no matter what Daniel told the police, no matter how Daniel had begged his father to lie for weeks before the trial began.

Inside his ears, the truth of consequence rang.

Thomas cast his eyes into the east where the sun was rising. The marbled clouds had gone on their way. The Nairobi sky still refused to change. Tomorrow the heat would swelter again. Thomas looked at the zebra and its foal one last time. Watching it sleep against the warmth of its father, he named the sleeping foal Sky. Thomas waited with them in silence until the sun came full into view and then made his way back to camp.

In the morning, the lions would find their prey.