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Lake Mcllwaine

Flora
Veit-Wild

'Why don't we go and see if we can spot some giraffes?'

'We don't have a car.'

'We can walk.'

'Walking is dangerous. Think of the rhino.'

'Rhinos don't come near the cottages, the warden said. We don't have to go far.'

'I don't like the wilderness. I loathe everything outside the city. You KNOW that. And, I can't see anything.'

'Didn't you bring your glasses?' Marie was trying to remain patient as her friend grew more disparaging and irritable.

'Ha, my glasses,' he sneered. 'You know I lost them. And I don't care. Why should I see anything in this world of shit? As long as I can read ...'

'But they were my father's ...'

'Ya, ya, your father's. Offal from your graciously kept bourgeois life that you have deigned handing down to me — me, your ape, your lover-clown, your ... Is there any whiskey left?'

Why on earth had she come out here with him? She'd carefully planned this three-day outing, making sure everything would work out well for everyone. Peter would take the kids to school in the mornings. In the afternoon they would come home with one of their friends. The maid was there to prepare meals. So Marie had packed enough food for the three days. There was beer, wine and whiskey to keep her companion going, yet not enough to get him completely drunk.

'Yeah, I'll get you some,' she said, putting ice in the tumbler. The National Parks Lodges, though not expensive, were well equipped with a fridge, stove, sheets and towels — all that was needed for a few days of pleasure. Having time, the whole night and the whole day, away from the rest of the world, to care for each other. It had worked the night before. They had grilled some meat on the *braai*, which the warden had prepared, drank a couple of beers watching the sun setting over the lake. The low walls surrounding the lawn were filling up with rock *dassies*, weird creatures without tails, scurrying about hastily, their grey fur hardly visible against the stones in the dimming light. It was peaceful, no sounds but the twitter and chirping of the birds and now and then the muffled moos of far-away animals.

It could be perfect, Marie thought, but he was again in one of his sullen moods and ruining everything.

Buddy was staring into the greyness. He hated being here, and he hated this woman who had taken him here. He felt trapped. He wanted to get away but couldn't. Once again he found himself dependent on *her*, who held his life in her hands and manipulated it according to her whims and desires. He hated being at a place where only white people went, taking their family and friends for a wildlife weekend, driving around in their cars, binoculars at hand, their 'ahs' and 'ohs' when they discovered one of the 'big five' — a giraffe anxiously nibbling at one of the acacia trees, a lonely elephant raising his big ears, angry about the intrusion of these aliens. Noisy spoilt kids shouting, Daddy, Daddy, can we get closer? He couldn't understand this fascination of white people with wild animals.

Darkness fell within minutes. Buddy shivered and tried to keep his eyes wide open. What was this? Had he heard a noise? Did he see a huge figure walking towards him? How he hated this countryside, full of the witches and evil spirits of his childhood. He had refused to go back to greet his family after his years in exile, to spare himself their bloody rituals, cleansing his spirit from the foreign world across the ocean — what the hell did they know about his life at Oxford ...

'Buddy?' — there was a voice close to his ear, two arms clasping his neck from behind. Oh yeah, he was here in that goddamned place with *her* ...

'What do you want? Leave me alone.'

As he brusquely shook off her arms, Marie felt tension rising in her body.

'Oh no, not this again,' she pleaded. 'Let's just enjoy ourselves. It was you who wanted to get away from the city, just the two of us, three entire days for ourselves ...'

'Oh yes, me, always me, you seem to know exactly what I want, do you? But let me tell you' — his voice was swelling with anger and scorn — 'you don't know anything. You don't know what it feels like to be here, me, the penniless black man, with a posh white lady, being ministered upon by a black servant — this warden blah blah — he comes from the ghetto just as I do, and now he is waiting on me! Ha, what do you know about my life ...'

‘But usually, when we go out, you mix with white people at places where most blacks won’t go, you don’t seem to mind, you always seem . . .’ Marie stopped herself. ‘The stench of our lives. Gut-rot was what one became. Stains and scars and blood and wounds . . .’ Words from his first novel seeped into her mind. Had she been oblivious again to his deep feelings of shame and self-disgust?

‘Get me some of the wine and let me read my book.’

Marie opened a bottle of Chateau Burgundy, one of the few varieties of wine a German winemaker had started to cultivate in the unfavourable climate of Zimbabwe. But Buddy liked it; he did not care as long as it was alcohol and could ease some of his tensions. She was also taking out tomatoes, green peppers and onions to prepare a stir-fry, not forgetting the chilli pods that her friend adored. He used to munch them pleasurable as if they were peanuts and, with a smile to her sons who were complaining about onions in their food, say: Hey guys, you should try these, they are really delicious.

No smile for anyone today, she thought, as she came to the verandah where Buddy was sitting with his book under the gas lamp. There were moths fluttering towards the light, big and small ones in all shades of brown and grey — stupid, she thought, can’t they see that this is not getting them anywhere, just bumping against the lantern again and again. Out in the dark, a few metres away, swarms of Christmas beetles buzzed and whirled around, floundering up and down as if they were drunk. Finally, with a popping noise and crackling of their black scales, they would drop to the stony ground. Why do

they all fall down, her children would ask, when they were sitting outside in their garden on a night like this. Are they dying? Yes, she would answer, it is the end of the season, the rain has made them come out and live for a couple of days, then they die, but next year their babies will be here.

‘What are you reading?’ she asked cautiously.

‘Oh, nothing you would know,’ he mumbled. ‘What do YOU know about literature? I can’t even talk to you about the books that matter to me. Kurt Vonnegut, if you care to know,’ spitting the *Kurt* out like a sword to slash her in half.

‘Of German origin, by the way, but why should you bother. You could never relate to the hell that he and some of us have gone through, yeah, a slaughterhouse it was here just like in Dresden, when the Rhodesians were bombing the camps of our freedom fighters, killing thousands of civilians at the same time, and erecting concentration camps in the rural areas, “keeps” they were called, but in the new novel I am working on I am calling them by their proper name, because the Rhodesians did to us just what you Germans did to the Jews. So why don’t you go home to your blond, blue-eyed husband, fascists as you all are, and leave me stranded here as usual.’

‘Stop it!’ Marie shrieked, not able to control her rage any longer, ‘You are torturing me, blaming me for all the mess in your own life. When Susi comes to fetch us tomorrow, we’ll drop you at your flat, and that IS IT . . .’

Yet a couple of weeks later, she would be knocking at his French window again, peering inside to see whether he was home. So it goes . . .