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YANKARI

Paul Rondema

Okwi celebrated his ninth birthday at Yankari Game Reserve in north eastern Nigeria. At his request, his parents packed food, clothes and his younger brother, Yomi, into their 1977 Mercedes and drove three hours, trying without success to avoid the potholes that mark Nigeria’s untamed roads. Upon arriving, they discovered the park in a state of disrepair common to many West-African attractions. It was not without excitement, however, that Okwi and Yomi witnessed the first water buffalo, the first bushbuck and the first baboon of their adventure.

Baboons are memorable creatures. They have been known to remove towels, clothes and wallets while people swim and raid unlocked cabins in search of a culinary or alcohol-related reward. But it is their almost constant chatter that is most impressive to many of Yankari’s visitors. Their voices, like the click of an old ceiling fan, the drip of a faulty faucet or hum of a fluorescent light, gradually fade into the background over time, but for those who are only visiting the constancy can at times be maddening. So it is true that whether stealing food, “talking” late into the night or generally terrorizing the guests, baboons are the most common, the most memorable and often the most unloved wildlife Yankari has to offer. This fact did not stop the smiles from appearing upon Okwi and Yomi’s faces when the first baboon was spotted in the distance.

The boys helped their parents unpack the contents of the Mercedes into their rondel. Visitors to Yankari are not permitted to sleep in tents. The stated purpose behind this rule is to protect guests from the hazards the baboon population brings. The unspoken purpose lies in a story that is repeated by children, one generation to the next. This story is never told in the presence of adults and is always accompanied by a warning. Having visited three years earlier, Okwi knew the story. Yomi had never heard the tale.

While they unpacked, the boys debated the sleeping arrangements. As the oldest, and the one whose birthday was being celebrated, Okwi was confident in his eventual victory but allowed his brother to retain the hope of winning. Having finished unpacking, choosing beds and changing into their swimming suits the boys joined their father for a swim at Wikki warm springs. With the jungle reaching down to the water’s edge on one side and white sand underfoot, the warm springs provide adults a chance to relax and children a chance to play. The twenty minute walk to the springs only adds to the refreshment provided by the swim. After rinsing off the grime of travel and playing childhood water games the three of them prepared to return to their rondel for dinner. It was on this walk, with their father far ahead, that Okwi began the tale.

There was a boy whose parents sent him to the warm springs one day. His name was Sunday. While swimming he met two brothers. And they swam, and they laughed.

While they swam, a guide returned from a day safari. Bako (a man described by the warden as not quite middle aged, slightly less than handsome and lacking enough refinement to be considered pleasant) had spent the afternoon leading a foreign couple through the bush. This couple was one of the lucky few who witness both elephants and lions on their visit. And so it was with a smile that Bako sat down at the bar and ordered a beer with the tip he received for his good fortune. The bartender, a man of indeterminate age and few words, listened to the guide tell of a pair of lions he had seen not more than three kilometers from where they sat. The lions had lazily rested in the shade, barely even stirring as Bako drove the Land Rover within fifty meters. The foreign woman had even been so bold as to open her door when the vehicle stopped. The lioness turned her head to them, lazily opening her eyes. But the slothful reaction of the lions was more than made up for when Bako lunged across the woman and slammed shut the door. Not yet ready to relinquish his tale, Bako berated the stupidity of the woman while drinking the fruits of her generosity.

Okwi slowed his steps and allowed his younger brother to get ahead. When Yomi turned, Okwi lowered his head and stared through his eyebrows. This is where Papa cannot hear, he said. And though the baboons above continued their chorus, Okwi’s voice lowered.

While Bako drank, Sunday and the two brothers played in the water until the sun, though not its light, could not be seen. With the sky darkening, the baboons above began to raise their voices against the coming night. Ignoring the increasing, and incessant racket, Sunday got out of the water. He had been instructed to return to his family’s rondel as soon as it started getting dark. He had never been to Yankari before, and even though the path was easy to follow, his parents worried for his safety. The brothers had visited once before. They were familiar with many of the shortcuts (though they often took longer to reach their destination) and took advantage of them often. And so it was that the brothers remained in the water while their new friend got out.

It was not long, however, until the brothers also ended their play. First one, then a second baboon had decided that the lack of a third human meant the chance of a successful foray into mischief was greater. The brothers realized they also would need to get out if they hoped to still have towels, shirts and shoes for their walk home.

And so the brothers walked up the hill, past trees lining the path, underneath the watchful, if not mischievous, gaze of hundreds of eyes. But as they walked the brothers did not notice that the baboons were growing quieter. And when they reached the top of the hill and looked up they recognized the silence and their eyes opened wide.
Okwi touched his brother’s shoulder. Are you scared yet? he asked. Yomi looked up with all the bravado his six years could muster and said he wasn’t scared. Okwi dropped his voice still lower and went on.

The bartender was not enjoying himself. Having finished over half a gallon of beer already the once mildly annoying aspects of the guide’s personality were quickly being magnified. It was during one of the rare pauses in Bako’s self-centered monologue that the bartender noticed the click of the ceiling fan and the hum of the fluorescent lights. And it was the recognition of those familiar sounds, without their constant companion the baboons, that prompted the bartender to look outside.

Sunday was standing in the clearing, around which lie the restaurant, the cracked tennis courts and the bar. Walking lazily across the far end of the courtyard was a lioness. Sunday, not more than twenty meters from the door to the bar, was standing motionless. His eyes followed the lioness as it meandered in the distance. Sniffing the air, the lioness turned away from the courtyard (and the boy) and looked down the road leading into the park. The bartender, watching all this, walked quickly to the phone. He picked it up and called the warden. As the bartender spoke, Bako overheard the quick words and looked out the window. He saw the lioness in the distance and noticed the same lighter colored patch of hair on her right flank that he had noticed earlier in the day. Without turning around he shouted for the bartender to “Come look at this. One of my lions is out there.” The bartender turned her head at the noise and paused.

Behind Sunday, the brothers stood frozen in the darkening shadows that guarded the path. They had seen the lioness look down the road, away from them, away from Sunday. The brothers, mindful now of the silence, crept quietly into the foliage that bordered the path. The older brother whispered. Run. Run to the bar. He was either not heard or ignored. In truth, Sunday was unable to move. He was rooted to that spot and, try as he might, he was unable to take the first step toward either the trees or the bar.

When the lioness turned her head, the bartender’s voice stopped. On the other end of the line, the warden understood the silence and replaced the phone, picked up his gun and walked out the door. Bako realized quickly the folly of his act and shrank into the shadows, away from the window and the fear that permeated his body.

The lioness, having heard the shout, began to wander in that direction. Though she was still over one hundred meters away, the brothers began to feel the small bit of excitement they once felt begin to disappear in the face of their growing fear.

As the lioness slowly walked, the older of the brothers tried desperately to will his new friend into action. Before it’s too late, he whispered. Run, please, run. But it was wise for Sunday to remain still. With short legs he would be no match for a hungry lioness. He stood. And he waited. He did not move. Looking closely, you would not have likely seen him breathe. And those who watched were silent as well. In that moment, with the eyes of a boy, his friends, a bartender and hundreds of baboons fixed on one lion, the silence encompassed them all.

And so it was, after minutes that seemed like hours, and after the lioness had wandered within thirty meters of the boy, that the younger of the brothers could not bear the scene any longer. An emotion, from a place unknown before this moment, began to rise within him. It moved through his stomach, into his lungs and up his throat. And when the younger brother’s lips parted it escaped. Through his grasping hands a small cry filtered out, piercing the quietness. Sunday, who now stood directly between the brothers and the lioness, heard the sound and watched as she turned her head and looked directly at him. Fear rose within him and he lost control of his bladder. And as his shorts darkened, he found the ability to move that had escaped him for so long. With his first step a change came over the lioness. No longer was she the disinterested observer. Now she saw her prey and prepared to pounce.

Yomi’s steps quickened. His brother stopped. Okwi had thought long about this story, how and when to tell it. This was a moment he had seen and he relished it. If you want to hear the rest we can’t get too close to Papa, he said. The knot in Yomi’s brow deepened as they slowed to barely a shuffle. Okwi took advantage of the quietness to bring his voice down to a whisper.

From his first movement, Sunday was sprinting. He took one stride and was now nineteen meters from the bar’s door. He took another and was eighteen meters away. Another step and then a fourth brought him closer still. The lioness stirred, the muscles in her legs taut. And at that moment the bartender prayed. And his prayer must have been answered, because the boy took four more strides and the lioness remained. With eyes fixed on his every move, the lioness stood her ground, watching as her prey was now only twelve meters from the door. The lioness had not moved when Sunday reached the halfway point. And though her muscles tensed, she stood her ground when Sunday was eight meters and then six meters from safety. But when his dash had taken him within four meters of the door the lioness began. While Sunday strode once the lioness covered four times the distance. Still, when he was only two meters from the door the lioness was still over thirty meters away. When he reached the door the lioness still had twenty meters to go. And when he turned the handle, the door held firm. He tried again. Again, the handle turned but the door held fast. The lioness seemed to pause in her chase, her head tilting to the side almost in amusement. Sunday turned and, in an instant, he saw her eyes grow large then narrow just before she leapt. In the split second between her feet hitting the ground and the final push, the world paused. And in that pause, the brothers saw her tightened muscles. And in that pause, the bartender saw her eyes ignite. And in that pause, Sunday felt the lion’s heat.

But like all pauses, the scene resumed. As the lioness left the ground, her roar filled the air. Like a gunshot, the lioness released a shout to shame every
baboon. And with a heaviness the lioness landed upon the boy. In hysterics, Sunday crumpled to the ground underneath her weight. Blood spilled out, staining the steps on which he and the lion lay. He screamed in horror as the lion's body lay on top of him.

Their eyes closed to the horror, Sunday, the bartender and the brothers did not see the warden lower his gun from across the courtyard and begin to run.

Okwi looked down at his brother. Yomi's eyes were barely slits and his fists were clenched as he tried to hold back his anger and his tears. He ended up ok? Yomi asked, angry at having cared so much. He began to run, to reach his father but Okwi caught his arm. Don't go yet, there's more. And though he could have whispered still, Okwi spoke aloud once again.

Sunday still cried out when the warden slid him from underneath the fallen lion. He fought with all he had when the bartender wiped the lion's blood from his arms, his body, his face. When his mother and father arrived he resisted their touch. He would not allow their embrace. He spent the night in a frenzy. For in his mind, the lion lay above him. Its weight pressing against him. Its heat scorching his body. Its blood mixing with his own, spilling onto the ground. And every touch and every sound and every sight took him back to that moment.

This is the story Okwi told his brother. And like his brother, Yomi felt little peace when the story ended. Okwi, being the older of the two, felt an obligation to bravery, though even he was shaken by the tale. And though the story ended somewhat well, neither boy was content.

Far behind their father now, the boys reached the top of the hill. The bar was on their left as they exited the trees. Lost in their thoughts, encompassed by their fears, with the sun setting quickly, the boys walked on, unaware of the stillness in the air.

December dreams:

Snow upon the branches;
Shoveled walks;
Three bedroom houses.

A two car garage
and a job in the city.
A hearing next week;
in the meantime no presents to buy.

And a son you don't know
who's growing without you;
ex-wife who really can't care.

A mailbox of millions you've already won;
Thousands you've already lost.

A hearty man's dinner,
and a hearty man's drink,
and falling to sleep with the TV still on.

Whatever happened when December would dream
of a year so full of promise?

Wherever went the smile you wore
when at midnight the clock would chime?

Whenever left the twinkling eye,
the sparkling smile
the hop in step
and love for life?

Whatever happened when December would dream
of a year so full of promise?

Whatever happened to December dreams?