SHORT STORY

Down in Africa

by Filippo Bagnasco



"The Invisible Metaphor, Acrylic on Plexiglas" by Pablo Saborío

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I stepped down from the jeep onto the red, burned earth. My brand new military boots blew a ring of small puffs of dirt as they touched the ground. Pat was already walking ahead, following our two guides on the narrow trail cut among the yellowing weeds.

The rainy season had long been over, and endless, hot, monotonous days had been listlessly following each other, taking us through our first torrid African summer. We hadn't enjoyed the blessing of a single drop of rain since we jumped off the plane in Dar Es Salaam, and we were now nearing the end of our third week. The air carried a spicy, sticky smell, uncannily close to cheap Korean soup, and it was so thick you could have cut it with a chainsaw. The sun bore down on us like a blow-torch, exactly twelve hours a day, give or take a few seconds. I was also running out of sunscreen. Luckily for me, my tropical spell would soon be over.

We spent our days scurrying around on a dirty 4x4, guided by locals whose only care in the world seemed to be the tiny percentage they would get out of the $ 60,000 Pat and I had spent on what had been advertised to us as "the experience of a lifetime." An African safari did hold the promise to be by far the most exciting thing I had ever done, but the reality of the Selous Wildlife Reserve hit us from day one in a very different way.

Seeing real, dangerous and beautiful wildlife was what we bought. Long days on the jeep and hot nights in the fanciest bed I've ever slept in was all we got. Think about those perfect National Geographic covers: the sunset behind the iconic baobab silhouette, buffaloes crossing a wild, foaming river, lush forests elegantly covered by a thin layer of fleeting mist. Now, forget all about it and picture sore feet, dust and mosquitoes the size of American drones.

I had even bought a new camera for the occasion, with new lenses for long distance shots and a tripod that had cost me as much as my TV set back home, which I was now direly missing, along with the rest of the living room and everything else I had left in my villa in West Vancouver.

For what it's worth, at least Pat seemed to be enjoying the trip only marginally more than I was. It had been his idea after all. He'd worked hard to convince me; he'd planned everything for us, made calls, applied for visas and booked us in for the routine round of shots. Now that we were here, looking the real thing straight in the face, it all seemed so pointless and lost in the distance.

We both knew the truth of what was going on, of course. Unchecked hunting and appallingly managed natural resources had rendered wildlife more and more scarce in the area and, from what I had heard, the rest of the continent was not doing much better.

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Thinking about it brought my simmering rage to a furious boil. Thousands upon thousands of animals mercilessly wiped out clean from their natural habitat and repurposed as trophies above the fireplaces of rich, idiotic Americans. Meanwhile, the local governments were making millions selling nameless chunks of land to many of the same idiotic Americans. Profits soared and everybody was happy.

I was just hoping to see and experience something different, that's all. Silly me. From what I had heard, Selous was supposed to be one of the few truly protected areas still in existence. Unfortunately, the truth far surpassed the lie.

My desire had been to turn my photographic safari into a personal reportage on the wildlife that still inhabited the reservation. While I was everything but a professional photographer, I had friends working in a small publishing company and hoped that maybe they could push to run a story on my experience, to wake up a few consciences overseas, and bring attention to the hecatomb that was happening daily here, away from everybody's eyes. Pat seemed interested too, and every day that we came back to our fancy resort without having seen so much as a red ant, he cursed like a sailor against the greed of the white man. Poor Pat, at least after another long day of sweating and trudging, the jacuzzi under the stars seemed to cheer him up a bit.

After nineteen days, all I'd managed to point my camera at were a couple of skinny hyenas and a flock of unspecified birds taking off in the distance. Nothing else. Absolute zero. So much for the conscience-awakening reportage. My only consolation was that at least I had gotten a good tan out of it. A $30,000 tan, tip excluded.

As I followed the two guides and Pat in our zillionth useless outing in the savanna, I noticed that on that day he was carrying an oblong, black canvas bag in addition to his usual backpack. A new tripod? Maybe, I had no idea. I was about to run up to him to ask, when one of the guides suddenly stopped, raising his left arm and simultaneously crouching down low. Pat and I did the same. I looked warily around. Boring or not, we were still deep in the Tanzanian outback, and lethal dangers are an everyday threat in this part of the world. I stayed low and slowly caught up with Pat.

"What is going…"

"Shh… over there. See?"

He pointed in front of us. I couldn't see anything, discounting a seemingly endless sea of dying grass.

"Pat, I don't…"

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“Shh! Stay low, do you want it to see you? Thank God we’re downwind.”

I strained my eyes and finally I saw it. The short hair was almost the same color as the brush all around, but the long mane and the ponderous jaw were unmistakable. A lazy wind carried his raw, earthy smell towards us. He still hadn't seen us. His dark, deep set eyes were pointing to our left, back towards where we’d left the car. Pat had laid down his long, black bag and opened it, while our two guides slowly manoeuvred to each of our sides, putting a good twenty paces between us and them.

“Here, I have a surprise for you. You'll thank me later.”

From the bag, he extracted two long hunting rifles and handed me one.

“Pat, what the…”

He brought a finger to his lips.

“It's all good, don’t worry. I've already paid for the permit. Another $1,5000, if you can believe it, but it's worth it. It's unbelievable what one has to pay to kill a big cat. These primitives charge as if they needed the money to go shopping at Holt's, and of course, everybody pays, no questions asked. Well, now it's our turn. I was afraid they had killed the last lion in this area, but apparently there is still one left. Not for long, right?

Now, don't worry about the rifle, it's real easy. It's a 550 Magnum, Czech made, the best you can find. The magazine holds five cartridges and I have another 20 in my belt, just in case. You won't need them though, this beauty handles like a baby and kills like a beast. You have shot before, right?”

I was speechless. I slowly shook my head.

“No? How did that happen? Never mind. As I said, it's super easy. Now, do as I do. Come on, pick it up, it doesn't bite. Well, not you anyway. Hold it like this. Place the butt firmly in the small between your shoulder and your chest. Exactly. It does a beautiful job of containing the recoil, but it's your first time and you certainly don't want to end up with a strained shoulder. Now, your left hand goes right here, in front of the floorplate, hold it strong. That’s the hand that aims, you want it to be as stable as possible. Good job.”

I was following his instructions mechanically, not really hearing him.

“Now, do you see these little numbers over here? That's your gunsight. The numbers are distances: 100 meters, 200 meters and so on. Our target is probably around 120 to 130 meters from us, so take your 100 meter line as a reference. Make it line up with the crosshair on the muzzle, like this. Aim behind its head if you can. It's the best spot. Shoot there and you won’t have anything to worry about. Dead before it hits the ground and you’ll still get a

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good trophy. See, the bullets are designed to disintegrate on impact. They perforate the bone and blow up in a dozen tiny pieces that travel everywhere inside the skull, making a mess of the brains. As I said, a secure kill."

He gave me a satisfied smile and went on.

"This one here is, obviously, the trigger. It does what it's supposed to do, nice and firm. Don't hesitate as you pull it, it senses your fear. Alright, I'm just kidding. Now concentrate, this is the most important part. See this little red knob? That's your manual safe release. Just push it forward and to the right with your thumb and you're good to go. One more piece of advice for you: it's better if you hold your breath as you pull the trigger, especially if it's your first time. It steadies you down and it makes it easier to get a good shot."

He jerked his head towards the lion, who was now pacing the area back and forth, with his nose high, as if he had sensed something wrong in the air.

"I will take a few steps towards it, while you can move to my left. Wait for my signal, alright? We don't wanna screw this up."

He got up and walked a few steps towards the lion, motioning me to move to my position. I looked at the rifle in my hands. They were slightly trembling, but not out of fear. The little I had was gone. What now shook my body was rage, unbound rage quickly piling up. He was going to shoot it, from 120 meters, right behind the head. A secure kill. One of the few lions left in the park, maybe the last one, and he was going to extinguish it. The work of a second.

I saw him ten meters in front of me, going down on one knee and bringing his rifle up. I did the same. I tried to keep his instructions in mind. He was right, it didn't seem to be difficult at all.

The butt close to your shoulder. Hold it strong. Place the crosshair on the victim, right behind the head. It makes a mess of the brains. A secure kill. The finger on the trigger. Relax.

I could see the back of his head clearly, the perfect spot, just beneath his khaki safari hat.

Push it with your thumb, forward and to the right. Steady your aim and one more thing: Hold your breath as you pull the trigger, especially if it's your first time.

It was my first time after all.

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