

we lived in the neighborhood, and if we didn't, what were we doing here? Hicham explained that he lived on the next block, and so they let us pass. I had never seen Beirut so deserted, and it seemed that the bombs, and the anticipation of violence at the announcement of the tribunal, had worked a kind of fatal magic on the populace. Everyone was hunkered indoors, eyes glued to TV screens for news of the next bomb, the next killing, the next atrocity in a never-ending series of atrocities.

After Hicham parked the car and we said a hasty good night, I took a cab back to my hotel. I paced nervously in my room, waiting for some sign of violence to break out, for the pro-Syrians to attack the Harni supporters, and vice versa. And then I heard it: the rattle and crack of gunfire down in the street just below my window. I ran to the light switch and turned off my lights, but my curiosity got the best of me, and like a fool I opened my balcony doors, stepped out, and looked down into the street. Two small boys were running away from a string of lit firecrackers.

The moon was high now, and I could see on the horizon a silver light that must have been reflected back into the sky by the invisible sea. Below, in the dark, a little farther down the street, a Lebanese soldier, palm leaves woven in his helmet mesh for camouflage, lolled behind his tank's gun turret, talking amiably with another soldier. His friend was making an obscene gesture known the world over, and the one up on the tank burst out laughing. I gripped the balcony with both hands and tried to catch my breath, all the while half expecting to be shot and knowing that I wouldn't be. I caught a heavy whiff of jacaranda mingling with the sulfurous odor of gunpowder drifting up to my window. I was shaking with fear, and felt utterly ridiculous, a real drama queen. *Welcome to Lebanon, I said to myself, welcome to Lebanon.*

JAY KIRK

Hotels Rwanda

FROM *CG*

ON OUR SEVENTH DAY in Rwanda, somewhere between Kibuye and Ruhengeri, on yet another devastated dirt road winding through yet another breathtaking landscape, Darren informed us that the hair on his arms appeared to be growing much more quickly than usual. Not at an alarming rate, but still, more growth than he'd ever noticed back in Los Angeles.

He put an arm between the front seats of the Land Rover so we could see for ourselves. Ernest and I agreed: his arms looked ape-y. One expected to be changed by travel; one looked for little symptoms in oneself, signs of alteration, but did this count as a valid transformation?

Ernest had never heard of such a thing. Once, he'd had a client who'd come all the way from Australia just to punch a mountain gorilla in the face, but nothing quite like this.

Jenn and Michael were in the Nissan Patrol somewhere behind us. We'd passed them not long ago, pulled over to the side of the road, handing out crayons to a group of children dressed in rags. Maridadi, their driver, was standing off to the side, laughing at the mayhem. All their friends back in New Hampshire thought they were crazy to come here on vacation. Darren had come to make a documentary, and I was here writing a piece about the alleged rebirth of the country's tourism trade, but Michael and Jenn had just come along for the experience.

Of course, by now we had each privately grown suspect of our own motives for taking a vacation to a country forever defined by bloodshed. At the worst moments, I wondered if we were soul-sick

vampires, in search of souvenirs among the ashes. Or were my friends and I just benumbed Westerners looking for something to startle us awake? Very likely we were not so different from the man willing to travel halfway round the world just to punch a mountain gorilla in the face. Sometimes you'll do anything to remember you're alive.

And who's to say? Perhaps the Australian who traveled to Rwanda just to punch a mountain gorilla is not so very different from the Hutu who, when asked why he had participated in the genocide, reported that "killing was less wearisome than farming."

But the killing is long over. The country of Rwanda has woken from its dreadful nightmare and is open for business. If you believe most reports, relative stability has been achieved, the country is truly safe, and the borders are more or less secure from incursions by the ousted Hutu militias that still haunt the contiguous forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The whole country has a feel of rejuvenation. The capital city of Kigali is thriving. Everywhere you look, there are cranes poised like red metal giraffes, slabs of concrete bristling with rebar, and cairns of clean bricks piled up along Boulevard de la Révolution. There's a new American embassy going up, and they're rebuilding the parliamentary Conseil National de Développement, damaged during the war. The Supreme Court building is getting a fresh coat of paint, and on every other corner is a shiny new bank. And while tourists aren't exactly flocking to Rwanda yet, the annual numbers are not unimpressive: sixteen thousand visited in 2003; thirty-one thousand in 2006 — this in contrast to the sixty-one tourists who came in 1994, the year of the genocide.

To its credit, the tourism board, or Office Rwandais du Tourisme et des Parcs Nationaux — whom we will come to know affectionately as the ORTPN — has not tried to sweep its nation's violent history under the rug in order to lure tourists, but has actually integrated it into the package, offering visits to very graphic and disturbing genocide memorials right alongside its ample eco-menu of awe-inspiring biodiversions. Though Rwanda is one of the poorer nations in Africa, so of course it needs the dollars, I do not believe it means to capitalize on the tragedy at all. On the other hand, there is this other thing the tourism board *might* capitalize upon, wittingly or not. And that is that there is no other place on earth

Hotels Rwanda

where you can visit mountain gorillas one day, discover the true cosmic dimensions of the banana the next, feel haunted and overwhelmed and harrowed to your very brink, and for the same price of admission, feel more awake than you have ever felt.

Maybe it's the cold bucket of history over the head. Maybe it's the collective effort of everyone around you to stay conscious, the shocked look of so many people who are still just waking up from the worst nightmare of their lives to realize that, yes, it was all for real. And while it's true that you may question whether or not you were fully awake before you got here, you will also probably spend an inordinate amount of time trying to lull yourself back to sleep, wherever you can find alcohol, because part of you will realize that being awake, really awake — well, it's just not in your nature. That is, if you're like me and you hail from the land of the Xbox, and you've become accustomed to — even begun to desire — the substitution of the virtual for the real, you probably prefer the dream to the directly experienced. But no matter how stuck you are in your digital simulator, however "experientially avoidant" you may be (as I was recently diagnosed by a cognitive-behavioral therapist), you will not remain immune to this odd sensation of waking up in Rwanda to discover, however disconcertingly at first, that not only do you have hair growing out of your arms, but your body also appears to possess these extra dimensions you had not taken into account of late. That you have been going around for some time a mere half-awake version of yourself. Just as you now realize that all along you've been eating these things that bear only a half-awake resemblance to a banana. And this is because, in Rwanda, a banana possesses at least seven dimensions, whereas in America, like most everything else, you get two at best.

On our third day, we drove toward Akagera National Park, where we hoped to see the sort of big game that roams in abundance in bordering Tanzania. As we travel east, the landscape broadens, the banana groves thicken, and my eyes cease to sting from the haze of smog that clings to Kigali. Along the way, we see crews of men in tart pink uniforms doing roadwork with pickaxes, clearing rubble or digging ditches. These are the many convicted *génocidaires*. As young men, most of them were recruited into the civilian Hutu militia, or Interahamwe, and trained to kill with an efficiency that

would make the Rwandan genocide the most rapid in human history.

As we get farther into the countryside, we see these same men working the fields with machetes, always dressed in the same easily spotted outfits. The sight of men in pink is commonplace, if not quite mundane. They are everywhere, chopping at the weeds. The sight of the killers becomes ordinary in the worst imaginable sense of the word.

There are virtually no cars on the roads, only countless pedestrians moving along both shoulders and overlaid bicycles wobbling out of the way as quickly as possible as we fly through villages. Women wear *kilege*, plain floral wraps, maybe matched with a D.A.R.E. T-shirt or one emblazoned with Ren and Stumpy or Hulk Hogan, babies tied to their backs, baskets filled with bananas or cassava balanced on their heads — not only these but also large, unwieldy bundles of firewood, men and women alike performing the feat, head-balancing large mud bricks, foam twin mattresses stacked four high, cases of orange Fanta, small engines, battered plaid suitcases, sacks of onions and carrots. I see people carrying backpacks — backpacks! — on their heads. Only the truly onerous hauls are saved for the national pack animal — the bicycle — upon which they somehow miraculously transport even more mind-boggling quantities of freight: eight cases of Primus beer balanced on the crossbar, a hut's worth of sorghum, and always, always bikes struggling under great clumsy pyramids of the plastic yellow jerrycans, salvaged ten-gallon oil containers, a dozen or more at a time, which are used to transport water for its every conceivable use.

On the hillsides, here and there, are shiny corrugated metal-roofed shanties, little Levittowns along the edges of the coffee plantations. These are new villages, Ernest says, built for Tutsi exiles back after the war. Before joining the Rwandan Patriotic Front and returning home, Ernest himself had lived in exile as a boy. He had fled with his parents in the early '60s, shortly after Rwanda gained independence and the first wave of massacres followed the handover from the Belgian colonizers to the Hutu majority. By 1963, as many as fourteen thousand Tutsi are estimated to have been killed. Prior to this, the Tutsi had enjoyed a position of privilege, having been left with a modicum of the status they'd held for hundreds of years as feudal lords, before the arrival of the Europeans. By 1990 there were between two hundred thousand and five

hundred thousand Tutsi living in exile. It would later be out of this great displaced populace that the RPF would build its army and fight its way to victory under Major General Paul Kagame. In Kenya, where the Ntagozera family had fled, Ernest eventually got a job as a professional guide for Abercrombie & Kent, one of the big safari operators there. For eighteen years, he took clients out on tours of his adopted land, including a few big stars like Kim Basinger, James Earl Jones, and Robert Wagner. In 1985 he took out the Holy Father himself, Pope John Paul II.

"He loved the animals a lot," Ernest says. "He blessed every single animal that we met," including one baby rhino who'd been specially flown in to the pope's camp from an animal orphanage in Nairobi on a DC-3 — no doubt in hopes of getting his kind taken off the endangered-species list. On the other hand, during the genocide, the Vatican's effectiveness would be limited to a synod of African bishops called together in Rome, where discussions were quickly bogged down by lengthy and irrelevant debate over liturgical vestments, polygamy, and drumming in church.

After the war, Ernest's mother, who died in 2006 at the age of eighty-four, finally returned from exile. "She always said, 'I don't care if I step in Rwanda and I die the next day. I just want to go home.' It was the most important thing to her in the world," he says.

We are stopped in the road, waiting for a herd of goats being led across by a small boy with a switch, and Ernest watches the boy as if watching a part of his own memory.

"She was a little bit sad because my father never got to see home again," he says. He gives the horn a toot to hurry along the memory. His father, who had worked as a professional hunter, had died in exile. Most of Ernest's family, of course, who did not go into exile, who stayed behind, were killed. His uncle Xavier was killed in Kibungo prefecture with his wife and seven children. In all he lost 122 relatives.

As we get farther into the country, mud huts with corrugated-metal roofs give way to mud huts with thatched roofs, and little cheering kids leap out of the red dust left in Maridadi's wake to howl at us. "*Agachupa! Agachupa!*"

"What are they saying?"

"*Agachupa,*" Ernest says. "They want your plastic water bottles. Our empties. To carry water on their long walk to school. They are

the children's version of the ubiquitous yellow jerricans. We can't drink enough water to keep up with the demand, but we try our best.

Inside the park, we are now eating Maridadi's dust — blood-red particles of laterite soil, to be geologically specific. It coats the inside of the Land Rover and within a few hours will turn my white shirt pink. We are in bush country — a dry and sparsely treed woodland of low acacias and termite mounds that look like Khmer temples — grinding along a road that is entirely without mercy or forgiveness or hope of redemption.

Ernest identifies a few trees: *Grevillea robusta*, *Euphorbia candellabrum*. He points out a blob of crumpled blue tinfoil in a tree. *Lamprolornis superbus*. Superb starling. Before starting his own private company, Ernest was director of tourism for the national parks and worked steadily to help resurrect those parks, most of which had been free-for-all zones for poachers and illegal timber interests until the government began to focus its energies on preservation, tourism, and subsidizing community projects to keep locals from poaching wildlife. Ernest himself trained an army of professional guides, trackers, and park rangers and personally oversaw the building of countless lodges, trails, roads, etc., while the ORTPN secured international funding to save the parks' native flora and fauna and began educating villagers that it really was in their best interest not to deplete the objects of wonder that brought in tourists, since with those tourists came money that through revenue sharing, is now funneled back into the villages for schools, medicine, irrigation projects, and the like. Boundaries were demarcated. The presence of armed soldiers put a stop to logging and curtailed illegal hunting. There are now plans under way to restock rhinoceros in Akagera, and eventually the same will be done with elephants.

"Oh, look there," Ernest says. "Impala." It is our first African wildlife sighting. The impala look like your garden-variety suburban white-tailed deer but with lyre-shaped horns. They graze, get nervous, then bound off. After an hour we have seen more impala, butterflies, a few more starling *superbus*, and a sun-bleached cow skull, but not much else.

"It is too hot," Ernest says. "The animals are in there, in the shade." He points at the endless tawny grass. Ordinarily, he says, this area would be chock-full of zebra. But it hasn't rained for some

time, everything is brown, and the animals have gone higher in search of water and greener grass. Of course, a lot of the animals were poached for food during the war. The entire time we will pass only one other group of tourists, an older couple with their college-age son, to whom, as we skirted their vehicle at a tricky spot in the road, Darren grimaced out the window and delivered a cheerful if unreciprocated "Howdy."

"They are French," Ernest said. "I do not think they say 'Howdy.'" He has a sour look on his face when he says how the Rwandan government blames the French for having helped facilitate the genocide. Their involvement was plain to all Rwandans, he practically shouts. It was the French who sold machetes to the Hutu, French soldiers who trained the militia, the French who provided refuge for deposed Hutu extremist leaders.

After another hour or more of gameless viewing, we climb up to a stunning view over the rounded rolling hills and a slate blue lake. We get out at the top to stretch and pee. The acacia trees are splatted on the hillside below like meaningless Rorschachs.

"Did you dudes see the lion?" Michael says. Frustrated that he hasn't been able to show us more game — any game, really — Ernest suggests that, it being close to lunch, we head to the lodge, and then we can go visit one of the tea plantations in the afternoon. We'll have better luck looking for big game early tomorrow morning.

Apparently, Maridadi knows a shortcut to the lodge. But no sooner have we accepted defeat and started back than Maridadi's truck lurches to a stop ahead of us.

"Look!" Ernest says. "Baboons!"

They are under a fig tree. A group of maybe twenty olive baboons. A few are in the branches, but most are on the ground below. The dominant male sits in the shade while the others take turns presenting their asses to him to inspect at close range, lick, and then dismiss with an approbatory smack.

"Have you ever seen one attack a human?" Darren asks.

"No, but I've seen them fight amongst themselves. They are very vicious. They have teeth like a dog's."

Next we see a group of gazelle, wagging their tails like puppies. A few topi spring by, mixed in with a few oribi, just to confuse us. Then a herd of eland — the largest of the antelope species — makes a grand, quivering-dewlapped appearance. As if choreographed

I duck from the window as the encroaching bush scrapes against the car. Thorny branches screech like bats across the windshield. We are now just following a faint path in the grass, going deeper and deeper into the bush. Despite an occasional sigh, which is more of a trailed-out baritone zzzzzzzzz, Ernest never loses his cool. A man must learn a great deal of patience when he has had to live in exile for thirty years.

Finally we stop, and he and Maridadi have a tense tailgate conference. When he comes back, he says he thinks we've basically gotten off the road and onto some kind of cow path, but that it would make more sense to continue down the cow path than to return down the four or five hours of rutted and directionless path we came in on. If we went back the way we came, it'd be dark before we got off whatever path we're on — assuming, that is, we were even going in the right direction.

"We might be sleeping in the bush tonight," Ernest says.

The notion that we are on a cow path is soon confirmed by cows blocking our way — giant Ankole cattle with eight-foot-long horns — and then we eventually come to a small cluster of huts at the base of a hill. We had actually passed this squalid habitation a while back. There is a small, greasy fire outside the main hut, and a handful of children creep toward us and stand around the Rover staring, shyly responding to Ernest's questions. "Amakuru?" "Meza." "Nibyiza." After a little while, a wizened skinny old herdsman comes out wearing a purple sweatshirt that looks like he must have found it buried in his backyard. Ernest and the man exchange words for a few moments before the man gets in the back seat with Darren and the warm reek of livestock and banana beer fills the cab. He chats with Ernest in Kinyarwanda ("He's telling me, 'What do you expect, it's a bush road!'",) and then, about twenty minutes later, we come to a visible fork in the cow path. Ernest gives him a few francs and the man hops out and begins his long walk back to his hut. We quickly come to the road, and in no time we're passing a sign to the entrance of the Akagera Game Lodge that says PLEASE BEWARE OF BABOONS.

After my shower, and the expulsion of a few pints of bloody grit from my nostrils — enough laterite soil to build my own miniature imitation Khmer termite mound — I go down to meet my compan-

for maximum effect, below them a giant herd of black Cape buffalo thunders by in the opposite direction over the hill. As I follow with my binoculars, watching as they make their way over the crest, my view is suddenly obstructed by a yellow webbed blur. I focus, glass upward. Refocus, glass a little higher. What exactly do I have here?

"Holy mother of God!" Darren shouts.

Casps all around. A giraffe! It is no more than twenty yards away, nipping the leaves off the upper reaches of a nearby tree. Where did it come from? While it chews, it stares at us unafraid. When we drive closer, it does not run away. Then, as if from nowhere, two more giraffes materialize out of the trees. Then six.

"Holy ~~shit~~!" Perched in the back seat window, Darren pans his camera over the gathering of extraterrestrials. "This is ~~obscene~~ obscene!"

With their black-and-yellow fur, their stubby horns like eye stalks, and the way they move, lurching almost aquatically, they look like gigantic yet infinitely graceful banana slugs. They are hyperclose. One giraffe, even more gigantic than the rest, steps out in front of us and blocks the road to get at the sweet tips of an acacia. They are so strange-looking. Despite their apparent benevolence, it is not a stretch to imagine laser rays shooting from their eyes, scorching everything in sight. In the other truck, Jenn's awestruck face is pressed to the window, gaping at the giraffe, silently mouthing the words, it seems to me, *I love you*.

"All roads must go somewhere, right?" Ernest sounds as if he's trying to convince himself. Though, technically, we are really only interested in the road that will take us to the lodge. I guess we should have been tipped off that we were lost hours earlier when Ernest started saying things under his breath like "This road is bothering me" and "This road keeps appearing and disappearing." And then, long after we had driven clear of anything resembling an actual road, "See? There are tire tracks in the grass. Somebody has come through here."

So much, we thought, for Maridadi's shortcut.

After an hour or so, when we ask if we can get out to take a leak, Ernest won't let us. "I do not trust this grass," he says. "There may be lions."

ions. Coming out of my room, I nearly trip over a couple of wolfy-looking baboons in the corridor, so I take the long way down to the poolside bar.

Evidently, after the war, they had a hard time getting this lodge back in running order. This is one of the great victories, so far, for Rwandan tourism, however chilling the story is in its own way. During the genocide, when the place had shut down, baboons had taken over the abandoned resort and turned it into their own fortress on the hill. Then, when the ORTPN reopened the lodge, in 2003, the squatters refused to go peacefully. They'd been living here almost ten years, hundreds of them, holed up like bandit kings. They had the best view in the park, a safe haven from their natural predators, the leopards. The government couldn't just pass out eviction notices. Rangers had to come in with Kalashnikovs and clear the place, fighting it out with the baboons all the way down to the front gate, all just to reclaim it for the *touristas*. After they patched the bullet holes, swept up the glass, and hosed off the tennis courts, they were open for business again. Ever since, the baboons have been exiled to the forest, presumably regrouping, making the occasional sortie into the dining room, waiting for their chance to take it all back.

I find Michael and Jenn down by the pool, lounging on the brink of an unbelievable panorama of the park's valleys below. Across the lawn is a conical, mansion-sized thatched hut going up on the edge of the property, which I am later told will be the presidential suite. Michael made inquiries about getting it for us, but it is not yet ready for guests. Just below the pool, at the edge of the grounds, near the woods, is an old stone cistern. Pink blossoms float on the muddy water.

There are few tourists in this grand resort. There is the French family with the college boy we passed earlier in the park before getting lost. The son is drinking a Coke and looks suicidally bored. A little bit later, a Belgian couple in matching Indiana Jones safari-style garb appear, but they keep to themselves. Why, I wonder, would they come here as tourists if not to torment their own consciences? To needlessly prod the colonial ghosts? Can a vacation be billed as historical catharsis?

Jenn, in a bikini bottom and a Sleater-Kinney T-shirt, is sitting on the edge of the pool, splashing her feet, and Michael is sprawled

out on a chaise longue. Darren is in the water, elbows propped on the ledge. We are sharing our awe over how long Ernest and Mari-dadi managed to conceal from us the fact that we were lost. Personally, I was grateful not to have known sooner than necessary.

Jenn, being unafraid in general, did not seem to mind that we were lost going on five hours. In fact, after a few beers, she says she wants to take a walk back down into the park come midnight.

"That's insane," Michael says.

"Definitely insane," Darren says. "You'll get eaten by a lion."

"I'll cast a spell to protect myself," she says.

Darren looks into the darkening woods with an air of gloom. "It's amazing how many animals out there could snuff us out."

Elephant, lion, buffalo, hyena. We compare and contrast and attempt to impose some sort of hierarchy onto the nearly infinite variety of horrible deaths by which nature holds it over us. It would be worse to be stomped to death by an elephant than exsanguinated by a lion, but not as bad as being mauled by a buffalo and not nearly so bad as being hamstrung and slowly eaten alive from the by a pack of ravenous hyenas. Much of this fodder is generated by Darren, who before our trip had been conscientious enough to consult a website specializing in beast-on-human fatalities in Africa.

"Hyenas, snakes, a lot of lions, but a lot of them were chimps. Completely unprovoked, too. One minute they look perfectly normal. The next minute —" He shakes his head. "Guess what they go for, Jay."

"I'm gonna say ."

"Exactly. They're seriously violent. First they disembowel you, and then they tear off your ."

I ponder this for a moment, since we are, in fact, half-planning to go chimpanzee tracking in a few days.

"We'll be fine," I say.

"The guy I read about got his ripped off right in front of his wife."

"If one attacks you, rip its balls off first," Michael says.

"No, that's the thing," Darren says. "They attack like eight at a time. You wouldn't stand a chance." He is quite in earnest. "As a pack, they all go for the male and they rip them right off. It's the first thing they do."

ask if we can get them anything from the bar, they tell us to get another bottle of *waragi*. Having already taken a few slugs of this stuff out of a flask from a stranger at a nightclub in Kigali a few nights earlier, the same night I had found myself onstage between dance acts doing my best Frank Sinatra impression, I make a face, to which the dark-haired Allison says that we just haven't had it mixed properly and orders us to procure a pint, a bottle of tonic water, and a bucket of ice. Properly mixed, it turns out, *waragi* tastes like a very good gin and tonic.

Once we've exhausted the subjects of AIDS and recent genocide tribunals, and then ordered up yet another bottle of *waragi*, our expat friends ask what's latest in the States, which leads to the topic of who won the Oscars, which naturally leads to the topic of movies in general, which leads me to declare that my favorite movie of the past few years is still *Grizzly Man*, which leads Darren to say, as I knew he would, "I [redacted] hate Werner Herzog."

"Why?" (blond) Allison asks.

"Because he had no right to just sit there like [redacted] with the headphones on and deny the audience, that's why," he says, referring to the famous scene where Herzog listens to the final entry in Timothy Treadwell's video diary as he is eaten alive by a bear. The lens cap of the camcorder had been left on, so only the audio portion is available to Herzog, who refuses to let the audience hear Treadwell's footage as he listens to it, leaving us to ponder only the expression on his face.

"We already know what happened," I say. "He doesn't need to exploit it to get the terror across." . . . *

"C'mon. It's the only reason anybody wants to see the movie," Darren says. "So why the [redacted] doesn't he have the [redacted] to play it?"

"It's not the only reason people went to see it."

[redacted] yes, it is, Jay! Of course it is!"

"He's being eaten alive! Why do we need to hear it? We know he's screaming and begging to God. The violence is implicit. Besides, it's his choice to show restraint." I grin. "Artistically." The girls seem to be in agreement with me, which pisses Darren off more, even though one of the Allison's hasn't even seen the movie.

"Oh, [redacted]. That is such [redacted]." Darren waves away my cigarette smoke. "The only reason anybody, and I mean *anybody*, went to see it was because he gets killed."

"You're ridiculous."

"So what are the chances this is gonna happen to us on our chimp tracking?"

"I've thought about it a lot, believe me."

"You've been thinking about this all along?"

"Honestly, I don't fear the gorillas at all. But I fear the chimps. And I think they're gonna smell that on me, and that's what scares me."

"Should we carry clubs?"

"My girlfriend suggested pepper spray."

"Or a stun gun or something."

"Dude," Darren says. "Once it happens, there's nothing you can do. It's like a riot, you know what I mean? And nobody can stop it. They're half your size, and they're as strong as you, and there's like eight of them."

"And they're right at your [redacted] level, obviously."

"Can't you just kick them in the face?"

"No, no, they kick *you* in the face."

[redacted]. So let's play golf instead," I say. "[redacted] the chimps."

He nods. "We can bag the chimps. I've seen chimps, man."

"You have?" I say. "No, you haven't."

"I've seen them in zoos."

Jenn is floating on her back, half listening to us with a euphoric smile, when she abruptly kicks out into the deep end of the pool, exclaiming, admonishing us, "Nothing is dangerous! Nothing is dangerous."

"Jesus," Darren says, "what if the baboons decide to take back the hotel and kill us all in our sleep?"

Michael cackles blackly. "That would be bad."

When Jenn and Michael retire to bed, Darren and I go to the upstairs lounge, where we run into a couple of nice-looking American NGO workers. They're at a table, playing a game with black marble-sized tree pods in a pocked board of wood. They live in Kigali and, if memory serves, work for an organization dedicated to curbing AIDS in Africa, which also has something to do with the fact that there's a [redacted] in the nightstand of every room I stay in — as standard as the portrait of His Excellency President Paul Kagame over each hotel's check-in desk, more reliable than Gideon's Bible. Allison and Allison — the girls' respective names — are in Akagera for a little weekend R and R. When we

"Everyone going into the movie knows he gets killed by the bear!"

"Exactly!" I say. "We already know going in that he gets eaten by a bear, so why belabor the point? The shock comes from watching the guy goofing around, or whatever, showing off in front of the camera, being 'normal,' and then you remember what happens next — or what already happened. The tension underlies every moment of the film. You never completely forget about what the bear did, so you're always a little off-guard."

Actually, come to think of it, watching Herzog is sort of like being in Rwanda. You become complacent. You're going along, and for a moment or two you forget where you are. You actually start to have a pretty good time, you begin to enjoy the beautiful scenery, until the next awful reminder comes along and kicks your legs out from under you, and you think you might vomit at the mere thought of it, at the unspeakable truth beneath every scenic vista and preternaturally tasty banana. It has almost become a game of sorts, in my mind, seeing how long I can go between each moment of remembering. Perhaps it also explains why we are drinking like such fiends.

At some point we have shifted, moved ourselves, taken our drinks, and gone down to the pool, where we continue the argument. One of the Allison asks if Darren thinks Herzog robbed him of the pleasure of hearing the death throes of a man being eaten alive. "Do you feel you were denied the experience?"

"Hell yes, that denied me! He denied the audience something he had absolutely no right to withhold. He had absolutely no right!" The girls are wrapped up in blankets on the chaise longue watching Darren fulminate. There is a certain charm to his indignation. Each word is suffused with such conviction, we can't help but feel partially swayed. Perhaps we have been denied a valuable life experience. And what could be worse than that?

But even more than that, it is starting to worry me just a bit that this mutual obsession we share — this incessant question of what it would be like to be eaten alive by: a) a bear, b) a chimpanzee, c) a rabid dik-dik, whatever — may have less to do with the animals themselves and more to do with the relative acceptability of being eaten alive by a mindless animal, whereas we do not sit around reflexively asking each other to imagine what it would really be

like, what it would really *really* be like, to watch a neighbor of many years hack apart your wife and child before your very eyes. Somehow the fear of animals is more bearable. They make a tidy stand-in for our darker, less rational, if altogether more probable fears.

At some point, we realize that Allison and Allison have departed, maybe after the second time a member of the hotel staff came down to courteously request that we stop shouting so the other guests might sleep, and momentarily, left alone, we sit glumly beside one another on the diving board, but then a sudden thump in the woods snaps us out of our drunken reverie.

"What was that?"

"I bet it was a baboon."

"Dirty savages."

We creep over to the edge of the wall, and then, peering into the dark, we see motion down by the edge of the woods. A glimpse of jagged white stripes. After a moment we realize what we're looking at. They are drinking out of the muddy cistern, their stripes faintly glowing in the dark. Seven zebras. I shudder when I think of the leopards out there, waiting for them, maybe lurking just beyond the invisible trees. At the same time, I have an overwhelming desire to wake Jenn, to go for a walk in the woods, to descend into the jungle. Foolishly, even though it's three in the morning, I wake her anyway. Despite the hour, half asleep, she doesn't want to miss the zebras and comes down to see them, but by then the zebras have already slipped back into the woods, as stealthily as they emerged.

In the western part of the country, bright green crops of tea and coffee grow on beautiful, Tuscan-like hills so artfully terraced they look like lumps of scrimshawed jade. At a higher altitude, the air is sweet and cool, and the landscape has an enchanted and hobby-vibe to it. Silver-blue eucalyptus and orange-blossomed jacaranda dot the hillsides. The beauty here is sublime: one could never stage the horrors of history in such a setting. Far below the winding road — about forty-seven barrel rolls down the steep drop to our immediate left that it would take, by my best estimate, before our truck burst into a ball of flames — are tiny figures carrying tiny hoses.

The little kids who run toward us as we speed up the winding roads are much more raggedy than in the east. Dressed in tatters that, to be honest, I would probably not use to clean my bike chain,

they stand by the side of the road selling overripe avocados. Clearly, however, they have had much more exposure to tourists than the children of Akagera; instead of shouting "Agachipya!" they hold out their hands, or make the finger-rubbing gesture for money, and shout "Muzungu!"

"Muzungu means white man," Ernest says. "Actually, it has nothing to do with being white, per se. The word *muzungu* means literally 'the person who goes in circles.'" The original term apparently referred to the first missionaries — the shock troops of the colonists — who would set up a mission, convert the natives, and then move on, set up another mission not far away, convert the natives there, then another, etc., before their eventual return to ground zero. Ergo, the person who goes in circles.

Given the original missionaries' success, the country of Rwanda, like many other African nations during colonial times, was washed clean of its pagan culture and replaced with the frayed belief system of the Europeans. They were so successful that until recently, the country was 90 percent Christian, with more than 60 percent Roman Catholic. Since the genocide, however, many have been leaving the church, and behind their departure is a truth that is difficult to fathom: in the most Christian of African nations, many of the worst massacres actually took place *inside* the churches. And what's even more sickening, the massacres often took place with the complicity of the clergy.

During earlier rehearsals for the genocide, such as the massacres that took place in the early '60s and in the '70s, people had naturally turned to the church for sanctuary. But in 1994, the Hutu anticipated that people would flock to their places of worship seeking refuge. By this point, severe restrictions had been imposed on the Tutsis. A Tutsi could not become an army officer, and soldiers could not marry Tutsi. Only certain quotas of Tutsi — 9 percent — could get jobs or go to school. Compulsory identity cards revealed the ethnicity of each citizen, and vigilante groups enforced the quotas imposed by the government. At the university in Butare, there were tribunals set up to determine the bloodlines of each student. The Tutsi had become utterly marginalized in society. The Catholic Church, by this point, was blatantly pro-Hutu. Instrumental in helping to organize racist political groups like Parmehutu, a central Hutu Power operation, Catholic missionaries and clergy spread genocidal ideology in their parishes and schools.

At the Roman Catholic Church in Cyangugu, 1,500 parishioners were killed. Seven thousand Seventh Day Adventists were killed at their church in Mugonero. One pastor, according to Philip Gourevitch's book *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, told a congregant, "You must be eliminated. God no longer wants you." Both priests and nuns alike were found guilty not only of turning a blind eye but also of assisting in the actual killing. In Nyange, Father Athanase Seromba first helped usher his Tutsi parishioners into the church, then worked side by side with militiamen who threw grenades through the open windows. Prior to coming, I had read that four thousand people had been killed at the church in Kibuye alone, but when we went to see for ourselves, the plaque put the figure at 11,400.

"There are quite a number of people who don't want to go back to the churches because of the genocide," Ernest says. "Because they believe that the Catholic Church participated in it — which is true."

It makes me think of the images I had seen at the genocide memorial in Kigali: fallen bodies crammed between the pews, bullet-riddled tabernacles, bloodstained altar cloths, statues of Mary in her blue robes looking over the carnage, as indifferent and inscrutable as the rafters. When we left, at first we were all silent. We had expected to be ~~up~~ up, and for a while we were just that. I had found Michael and Jenn outside, by the mass graves — half a dozen austere slabs of concrete, each the size of a city skating rink — trying without luck to collect themselves. Darren looked caustic. Walking around the perimeter of the mass graves, I felt ashamed for even attempting to penetrate a grief that was not properly mine. But I could not shake the gallery of family photographs I had seen inside — more harrowing than the room of skulls, or the room of leg bones and arm bones stacked like split firewood, worse than the rooms of bloodied clothes, the torn skirts, the spattered Superman bed sheets, for me at least, was this dimly lit gallery, where the walls were pasted with thousands of snapshots of the once living. Three little boys in matching white suits and black bow ties. A girl home on college break. A ladies' man on a red couch, wearing a warm, come-hither smile. A priest baptizing a cow. A church potluck. A couple calming their swaddled newborn. A college professor in a black turtleneck. A teenager in tight blue jeans and denim jacket. Here is a grandfather. A grandmother in

pearls. A stern-looking man drinking from an orange gourd. A nun. A man in a purple running suit. A dumbstruck bride. A man reading a book in a public garden. A faded Polaroid of a holiday dinner. A secretary at her desk, touching flowers in a vase. More babies. More grandmothers. More granddaughters. Newlyweds cutting a pink cake. Friends drinking Primus. Friends playing chess. Friends laughing. Friends mugging for the camera. Unsuspecting friends. Friends not anticipating death.

But then, on the way back to the hotel, the strangest thing happened. A sense of euphoria came over us. Now, on the streets, everybody seemed so intensely alive. More alive than anyone had ever seemed. The electric, frenetic pace of humans on the move, rush hour in Kigali, motorcycle taxis zipping around us, boys riding bicycles two at a time, people just getting off work and walking along the roads in small and large groups, women with woven baskets on their heads, people on cell phones, laughing schoolgirls in bright blue dress uniforms, boys in clean khakis, everyone looking so defiantly alive!

We suddenly very much wanted to be part of it, to get as close to the living as possible. The appropriate thing to do — with no thought of disrespect to the dead — was to go out. Check out the reopened nightclubs we'd heard about. We wanted music and alcohol. So we went hopping, to Cadillac and Club Planet and then to KBC, but each place was tamer than the last: the night had not yet caught fire. And so we went in search of something livelier. Maridadi, amused by our ebullient demands to get us to the next place, drove us around the city, with 50 Cent blasting on the radio — *Y'all niggas better lay down / Yeah, I mean stay down* — until finally, finally we landed at a dingy hall called the Sky Hotel. It was here where, at a sort of open talent show, between two equally gyratory and barely clad dance acts, I'd found myself onstage with a mike, in front of three hundred drunken, hooting Rwandans, doing my worst Frank Sinatra . . .

One day, after returning from seeing an enormous clan of colobus monkeys, creatures who look like robed judges swinging through the forest canopy in their black-and-white fur — who line up on branches, maybe ten in a row, to take turns diving out into the abyss, making great daring leaps, thrilling leaps, leaps of faith and leaps of madness, jumping twenty, thirty feet, the long white locks that grow out of their cheeks streaming like magnificent side-

burns — Darren confesses that the entire day, to his great annoyance, he has had the song "Lady in Red" going through his head. He says it's driving him nuts.

Ernest glances at him in the rearview mirror. "It's because you drank *waragi* last night." He shrugs as if this fact could not be more plain.

In a village outside the Nyungwe Forest, we pass a large crowd on a hillside, dressed in their Sunday best, many holding colorful parasols. They are quietly gathered, sitting in the grass, a hundred or so, an entire village, by the looks of it. What are they doing, we wonder, waiting for a priest? I look for the bride. It's a beautiful day. Blue skies. The air is sweet and blowsy. A perfect day for a wedding. But then Ernest points out the men with official-looking sashes, and the now conspicuous man in a chair beneath a tree, dressed in pink.

"It is a *Gacaca*," he says. One of the local tribunals set up for villagers to try members of their community who participated in the genocide. So many people are guilty, so many people participated, killed their neighbors, ~~and~~ their neighbors, chopped their neighbors to pieces, that if they relied on the conventional court system alone, it is estimated it would take more than one hundred years to try everyone involved. Something like seventy thousand suspects remain in jail awaiting trial. By using the *Gacaca* tribunals, they hope to speed trials and sentencing.

Ernest says he has personally known individuals who have been tried but whom he had no idea were guilty. Once when he attended a local *Gacaca*, he was surprised when the name of a neighbor of his, a friend he drank beer with in the evenings, was suddenly called out by the chairman. "He stepped forward, and when his turn came, he was asked very many questions. About allegations of what he did during the genocide. He answered some questions; others, he claimed they were lies." At the next *Gacaca*, Ernest said, more people testified against his neighbor, and several prisoners were brought in to testify that he had been a driver for the Interahamwe and that he had personally killed Tutsis in the suburbs. Ernest was stunned. He had never suspected a thing. But that is precisely the distinctive, paranoid feature of this particular genocide: how so many ordinary citizens were enjoined to participate in the killing. They will never sort out all the guilty.

On the way into Ruhengeri, we pass a bored teenager absentmindedly scraping his machete across a guardrail. On the shoulder of the road, beside a spilled sack of carrots, a man attempts to repair his bicycle by hammering the derailleur with a rock. All safari trucks eventually converge on Ruhengeri, being, such as it is, the nearest village to Parc National des Volcans. It is here where the majority of tourists flock to see the mountain gorillas. And it is because of them that the highest denomination of Rwanda's Kool-Aid-colored currency features, instead of a general or politician, an image of *Gorilla berengei berengei* (so named after Captain Robert von Beringe, the first lucky white man to shoot one). But when one of the linchpins of your economy is an endangered species — there are only 720 mountain gorillas alive today — one wants to proceed with caution, as the ORTPN and the government of Rwanda have so conscientiously done. They have not treated their lucrative spectacle as a sideshow, selling tickets at the bottom of the mountain to all comers, but in fact allot only a limited number per day, and for only one hour per visit (admission is five hundred dollars). If you show so much as a snuffle that they deem possibly infectious to the gorillas, you are bumped from the hike.

When we meet early the next morning at the base station, we are broken up into groups, are given a guide, and receive our briefing, which I had assumed would include strict instruction on how to behave in an adequately humble way conducive to not being pummeled to death — like, for instance, how to make that weird pig-grunt noise Sigourney Weaver used in *Gorillas in the Mist* to pacify the apes — but we find ourselves hitting the trail with nothing more than walking sticks and Ernest's advice (he does not come with us) to just relax in the event one of them decides to sit on you.

"What can you do to avoid getting sat on?"

"Nothing," he said. "They are so big, they can do anything they want to do to you."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

The first leg of the hike is easy going, up a mild grade across an open heath of low grass and mossy rocks. The weather is sweet and the ground is soft on the feet. Given the altitude, our breathing is a little labored, but the hike is not half as difficult as we'd been led to believe by the guidebooks. We walk in single file, with our guide

and one of the two armed guards who accompany us in the lead and the other guard bringing up the tail. The machine guns they carry are as much to protect us from the Cape buffalo who share the mountain with the gorillas as they are to protect us from any hostiles lingering on the DRC side of the forest. But we are told we have little to fear; it has been nine years now without a single tourist dragged off into the woods and hacked to death with machetes.

When we come to a broad stone wall, we rest. The wall separates the bosky meadow from the bamboo forest above. One side of the wall is light and open; the other, dark and treacherous. Rare golden monkeys frolic along the wall and chatter at us from the eucalyptus trees. We're lucky to see them.

While our guide waits to hear from the trackers, checking in periodically on his walkie-talkie, Jenn kneels, her staff pressed to her forehead, praying before the wall like a knight errant.

"Is she praying to God?" our guide asks me.

"No," I say. "She's praying to the gorillas." Which I think is true. It's the sort of thing I might do myself if I were alone. Get down on my knees and rejoice inwardly at the immensity of it all. The magic of the day. Looming above us, the volcano Mikeno presses vertiginously against the cloudless blue sky. Once the ranger gets the call on the radio, we clamber over a breach in the stone wall and enter the forest one at a time.

Now the climb is more difficult, steeper, the trail a mess of churned mud. It is also claustrophobic: a narrow tunnel through the tangled forest, with the occasional detour where buffalo have blazed their own trails, the bamboo squashed under their hooves like reeds. As we climb higher, there are so many of these extra game trails bisecting our own that it becomes a labyrinth, and it seems ever more urgent to keep up with our guide lest we end up on the wrong trail. If you have ever read Ernest Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," then you will know that the Cape buffalo is widely considered, even by the most stoic of hunters, to be the most dangerous animal in Africa, and will understand when I say how unsettling it was when our guide stopped midway to call our attention to the pungent anxiety-inducing musk from the buffalo that were now "surrounding us."

Darren asks, in a whisper, why the buffalo will charge us but leave the gorillas alone.

"All the animals give each other a good natural vibe," Jenn says. "We give them a weird vibe."

What, I ask Jenn, is her current level of fear on a scale of one to ten?

She turns and smiles at me as if I'm crazy. "Zero!"

I confess mine is a solid seven. Not that the fear is paralyzing, but I am able to think of little else as we continue upward — especially as the ominous ramshackle openings in the brush left by the buffalo seem to multiply as we gain altitude. I linger toward the back, sticking as close as possible to the guy with the AK-47.

We talk in whispers now. The gorillas, our trackers say, are just yonder. So we leave our backpacks and walking sticks behind in a pile and then creep through the underbrush, into an overgrown glade. It looks like we're in the middle of a Rousseau painting. Giant ferns, bamboo, a mess of exotic oversize designs in green. All the trees are upholstered with shaggy moss. And there, in the center of this greenery, is a quarter-ton male mountain gorilla just sitting in the open, stuffing leaves into his mouth.

Darren struggles to stabilize his tripod in a scrub of nettles — they have warned us not to scream if the nettles sting our arms or legs, for fear our cries of pain will upset the gorillas. Hours earlier Darren had confessed to me that he didn't expect to be in complete awe. Not really. He's done enough nature documentaries now not to expect to experience a subluxation in space. He's seen polar bears. He's seen emperor penguins. Like me, he was a little skeptical about the lasting impact the whole thing would have on him, that it would ultimately feel as mundane as anything else, more or less, so long as nobody got any arms ripped out, but for now we are as giddy as schoolchildren. We would do anything to prolong the magic of this encounter. The expression on Jenn's face betrays a visible strain: the sincere efforts of a mind at work to make the moment count.

The gorilla moves over to a spinney of trees and begins yanking down the vines and stripping them with his teeth. Every time he yanks down a vine, it makes a sound like a meth addict ripping copper wiring out of a plaster wall. His arms are absurdly long. His head is the size of a vault. This is the biggest primate on the face of the planet: the hominid equivalent of a grizzly.

Not too far away, in a shaded grotto of leaves and vines, is a

mama gorilla holding her infant. The apeling looks like one of Spielberg's animatronic trolls: the perfect synthesis of ugly-cute. Their ripe musk fills the air as in a sauna; the scent is peppery sweet, like jalapeños frying in molasses. The guides, eager to let us take pictures, say the gorillas are "habituated" to us *muzungus* with cameras, which clearly they are, but at the same time it somehow seems like the wrong word when it's so obvious that what they are is profoundly indifferent to our presence. Or even worse: as if we don't even exist. And not as if they're only pretending we don't exist. . . .

On the way back down the mountain, even though I slip in just as much buffalo as I did on the way up, on a scale of one to ten, I feel zero fear. The mountain gorillas have liberated me for the time being. On the other hand, I'll admit, strangely enough, that I am also left a little sad. This experience has been checked off the list. It isn't just that it's over, but also because it no longer belongs to the exclusive realm of imagination, and to be quite honest, I think my imagination will miss it. Memory will distort it for its own doubtful purposes. Which makes me wonder if there's really any value to this experience thing at all. Why is having done something better than having imagined doing something? I mean, what if the so-called value of experience is overinflated? Why do we expect to be changed by experience at all?

Since traveling to Rwanda, I am more _____.

I have become increasingly plagued by thoughts of _____.

I am no longer _____.

I am more inclined to believe in _____.

But less inclined to believe _____ about humanity.

How have your thoughts about the world in general changed since you left your hotel one morning and saw a woman missing her legs sitting in the grass on the shoulder of the road? Please explain: _____.

Midafternoon on our last full day, Darren and I are down on the beach, under the shade of an umbrella, reading, with a bottle of South African sauvignon blanc chilling in a silver ice bucket. Michael and Jenn have been secluded in their room for the past few days, recovering from some intestinal flu they picked up in Ruhengeri. Nearby is a little girl digging in the sand and a group

of middle-aged British women getting pleasantly snickered, their own ice buckets askew in the khaki sand, their many accumulated glasses sparkling in the merry beach air.

The lake is choppy and shimmers enticingly, though Darren and I have already decided that we are strictly abiding advice given by our respective Stateside travel doctors to avoid swimming in the water at all costs. Something about microbes piloting up your urethra and laying poisonous eggs in your bladder. This plus the underwater pockets of volcanic gas — they're extracting the methane as an energy source — leaves us happily on the beach. Just across the lake, looming above the Congolese city of Goma, is the diabolical volcano known as Nyiragongo. When it erupted six years ago, it killed one hundred people and left tens of thousands homeless. They say it will blow again, and when it does there's no telling how many will die. Vesuvius killed 3,300; Nyiragongo could kill two million. But the next time, death won't be limited to those across the lake (morose volcanologists predict). The sulfur dioxide will sneak across the water and kill anyone here as well. They won't smell it; they'll die in their sleep. When I share this piece of information with Darren, which I gleaned from a PBS special, he asks when it's due to erupt.

"Pretty soon, I think."

"God, I hope it's not today or tomorrow," he says. "I really do."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I say.

"Ole ORTPN doesn't advertise that, does it? Exploding volcanoes and methane gas." He lifts the bottle from the ice bucket, sees that it's empty, and starts scanning the beach for our waiter.

The grounds of the hotel really are paradise: radiant palm trees, ornamental cacti, euphorbia trees, purple-blossomed jacaranda, taut white volleyball nets. The cheerful sound of kids playing in the water comes from the other side of the fence, where a guard is posted between the hotel property and the have-nots of Gisenyi. The guard looks bored, twiddling his nightstick in the sand. A short while later, I glance up and watch two dugout canoes slowly plying their way across the water; when they get closer, we can hear the passengers chanting as they paddle. For a minute, unthinkingly, I take it to be some kind of tourist gimmick before recalling where I am. Again I have forgotten, only to have memory stab back

under the door like an envelope bearing unwanted news, when I look farther down the beach.

Not twenty yards beyond the fence, out on a rocky outcrop, is a crowd of loitering men. Each holds an Easter-yellow jerrican, a detail made all the more vivid and disheartening by the fact that the mob is attired entirely in pink. There are at least a hundred of them. I didn't think of it till now, but not a five-minute walk from here is a prison. On our way into town yesterday morning, we saw families waiting outside to visit. Near them, a group of naked boys are in the water tossing a ball. The convicts take turns, one at a time, wading out a little bit, to submerge their jugs. They hold them down for what seems like a long time, until the air bubbles dwindle, while the others wait patiently for their turn. Their pink shirts billow gently in the placid breeze.

When Michael and Jenn finally rejoin us, close to dinner time, they seem a little wracked out, but their intestines are evidently strong enough for them to order beers from the waiter when he makes his way back around. Jenn is dressed ready to swim. This despite my best efforts to remind her of the lurking schistosomiasis: the infected fluke larvae waiting to burrow into her skin, the fevers and coughing, the seizures and lesions of the brain she has to look forward to for her recklessness. Does she really want bladder cancer? Is a dip in the lake really worth it?

"There's no way I'm not going swimming in Africa," she says. "That's ridiculous. Look, plenty of people are swimming. They're fine."

She takes off her towel and strolls down to the water's edge. After a moment, Michael says, "_____" ties his hair in a ponytail, drops his shirt, and follows.

She waits for him, and then, holding hands, they start out into the beautiful poisonous lake. Just watching them brings my fear level to 3.5. The water turns out to be shallower than you'd think, so they have to wade out farther before it rises to their shoulders. They are floating now, holding on to each other, and Jenn lifts her glistening arms as if to embrace the sky. They look like people who truly know they are blessed. For a long time, they stay like that, bobbing and grinning, looking up in awe as the heavy military planes rumble low overhead into Goma. The war goes on there, despite recent elections. Nyiragongo smolders in the distance. And slowly,

one jug at a time, the men in pink haul water out of the lake as if exhuming the incomprehensible mystery of their crimes. Who of us would have known that in five short months, back up in the Virungas, their militia friends would slaughter seven of our friends the mountain gorillas, and would even set one pregnant female on fire? There will be speculation that the massacres are meant to intimidate park rangers who've become critical of the charcoal-smuggling interests and the risks posed to the gorilla sanctuary. Then again, perhaps they killed the gorillas just as a reminder, to let their enemies know that they are still there, unvanquished, that they are still capable of unspeakable acts. When I get the news, I will wish that Jenn could have been there to protect them; I will wish her prayers had worked. But she is getting farther away from me now, out in the water, and it takes some effort to control my fear as the shrieks of the children playing in the water near the men drowning their plastic jugs reach a frenzied pitch. But then, as I see the waiter coming back toward us, walking calmly across the sand, a bottle of wine balanced on his tray, I remember, and repeat under my breath the reassuring mantra until I can almost stand to believe it. *Nothing is dangerous . . . Nothing is dangerous . . . Nothing is dangerous . . . Nothing is dangerous . . .*

KIRAN DESAI

Dragon Season

FROM *Travel + Leisure*

THE MURAL IN THE TASHIDING MONASTERY is of a graceful woman mounted on a yak in a lotus blossom garden. "That is Tara," explains a monk: a virtuous form of Buddha.

"And that?" A fierce figure resembling something out of a Japanese cartoon sits astride a snow lion, scattering thunderbolts. "He disperses ghosts, chases evil spirits."

Another mural shows creatures in a mountain pond, a beast with an elephant trunk emerging from a conch shell, a winged lion with a bird's beak and horns.

"These you will not find here. If you go farther north into the jungle, you will find them."

"And these?" The monk smiles, wraps, and rewraps his scarlet shawl. "You know, in the rainy season they come out of the ground and fly about."

"I'm sorry?"

"Dragons, you know how they fly about?"

It is dragon season in Sikkim. Monsoon storms hurdle against mountains with a savagery matched only by the ferocity with which the earth responds to this onslaught. Overnight, things sprout and grow. Little clusters of nuts are lost in a wild exuberance of cardamom, banana, and deadly nightshade. The Tista and the Rangit rivers leap through jungle of teak and incandescent fields of paddy. Ginger is being harvested, and the freshly dug roots spice the air.

Sikkim is possessed of an almost mythical bounty. The mountainside is so steep, the vegetation seems confounded: everything grows. Cactus, orchids, orange trees, rhododendron, oak. Higher,