Ears to Hear

Jason Mehl

This is not my first panic attack in Africa, but it might be my last.

"Stop!" George whispers, reaching over and grabbing my left shoulder as we jerk to a stop.

Two water buffalo stand in a small clearing to the left of the trail behind ten yards of tall savanna grass—brown, gently bending, the tips bending farther with the breeze. The buffalo stare at us—heavy black heads with black noses, black horns caked with mud, black eyes. Each of our eyes are at the same level. George's Ugandan safari guide eyes. Louise's Irish wife mother missionary eyes. My American husband father missionary eyes. Four water buffalo eyes. God's eyes.

"The motor too!" George whispers. The clutch and brake are to the floor. I gently shift to neutral, ease off the clutch and turn off the ignition. Silence. My ears open wide and reach for anything. All windows are closed. I hear nothing external. I hear my heart speeding up in my ears and that internal ringing that's always there. A missionary doctor in jean shorts told me that ringing in the ears means high blood pressure. He also said he could diagnose malaria by the smell of a person's breath. I can't smell any breath. I can smell bodies. Louise's faint

fragrance still becoming familiar two years into our marriage. George's clean but pungent sweat, like the sweat of so many Africans I've sweated among daily during my five Uganda years. My own warmth coming up through my shirt and down through the salt of dried sweat in the frayed bill of my hat.

Louise clicks the window button and nothing happens. She turns to look at me. I look at George behind me. He smiles and nods. I swallow big and half-turn the key and it loosens into ignition limbo and her window rolls down with an electric hum quickly muffled by discordant clicks, rattles, tweets and whistles. My ears fill. I lean forward slightly so I can see both buffalo clearly around Louise's head. She doesn't move. I can hear her smile.

George speaks softly from the center of the back seat. He is completely comfortable with himself, his English, his job, his AK-47. "These sounds you are hearing—they are signals of danger. From the insects and the birds."

No movements or sniffs or puffs or grunts from the buffalo, just stares. Before we drove up, the buffalos' hearts were beating according to their understanding of their situation. We changed their situation. They are assessing their new situation, aided by the signals of danger in the air, in the grass, and on the ground—a community danger barometer constantly registering the contributions of all members—establishing a threat level. The buffalo know that in one heartbeat, with a new click or whistle, they could be a step, breath or twitch away from prowling death.

If we were looking at lions, the windows would be up. I wouldn't ask George. My heart might be beating as fast, but with excitement, not fear. The tank is half full. George knows how to get back to the lodge. He also has a gun. One, or two, or even five lions couldn't knock over a Landcruiser. If lions attacked us it would be frightening, but also entertaining. They would be loud and angry, but they couldn't break any glass with paws and teeth. We'd get great pictures and have a great story. Buffalo, however—these two buffalo ten yards away—if they hit us at once, with heads down, they could knock us over. Their horns would break the windows. That's when the lions would come. If four or five roaring lions attack us while we're pinned in the car, trying to unbuckle seatbelts, George will be lucky to kill one. Even if he kills three or four, at least one—loud and angry—will be left.

I touch the key but don't turn it. The danger sounds still ring outside and fill my ears through Louise's window. The buffalo haven't blinked. They show no fear. They live in the realm of prowling death and when danger comes, they stare at it. I only know how to fear. I want to know how to live in danger without fear.

Chest pain.

"We go?" George says.

Louise is still looking out her window. I rub the spot on my chest above the pain and cough. Then I ask Louise, "We go?"

"This is brilliant!" she says like a Belfast schoolgirl. She turns around to face me. She's been smiling since the window rolled down. Her dark hair is tied up with a wide scarf. Her face freckles out from beneath the scarf—beautifully, wonderfully—and her eyes and nose and lips and teeth are thrilled and hiding nothing. This is her birthday present. She's thirty-three. Jesus died at thirty-three. I want her to outlive Jesus. I've outlived Jesus by two years. I want her to outlive me. But I can't bear the thought.

"You wanna stare these guys down some more?"

"Don't you love it?" she says.

"I do love it. Should we keep going?"

"Let's find some lions," she nods and turns back to the buffalo.

I turn the ignition and pump the gas gently and we go. The buffalo barely move for the first time. Their heads swivel to watch us leave. I take a deep slow breath in and sigh it out with puffed cheeks.

The trail opens and I roll my window down with my middle finger, the longest of the three I use to rub that spot on my chest. It's still morning and the breeze cools. Red dust blows in and films over the clock on the car radio that's not turned on. I need to hear, but not music. Grass tickles the red clay thick skin of the vehicle's undercarriage and rocks dig, shift and crumble under the colonial "y" tyres upholding us. Right hand on the wheel, left hand on the stick—wrong side of the car, wrong side of the world—bouncing and rattling over red trails in the brown grass of Murchison Falls National Park—savanna rolling into hills banking the Victoria Nile feeding into Lake Albert. Albert. Victoria. Prince. Queen. Long living. Long dead. Long looking straight through the native fishermen and hunters and up each other's skirts for what Churchill named "The Pearl of Africa." Churchill named it, but no one's found it.

Louise and I found Uganda. We found each other in Uganda. We had a child in Uganda and bought a car in Uganda. The tyre cover on the back of the Landcruiser was a wedding gift, made in Uganda—Irish and American flags flying crossed. We're not in a safari vehicle. Most other cars back at the lodge or spread wide around the miles of trails in the park are vans or Landrovers, painted rugged safari green. Most of them driven by Ugandan drivers who look out beyond the tracks, through the sausage and acacia trees and leopards and lions to the cash at the end of the day or week and to the table at home surrounded by mouths full of joy but not much else unless their daddy drivers keep driving and smiling for Mzungu passengers. I was happy to be driving, and George had told us he was happy not to drive. George. Everyone's a king or a queen—or a saint. Louise and me, we're not queen, king or saint. We are happy. But we have been sad. We have been scared.

One night, several months before, driving home from Kampala, my left hand went numb and the numbness traveled up my left arm. I told Louise. She was, as always, conversational. She told me about a girl she knows back home who had a similar feeling, went to the doctor, and found out she had some kind of nerve disease or something that was causing her spine to deteriorate.

I stopped worrying about a heart attack and pictured my brain slipping through the bottom of my skull and falling into the bottom of my gut on top of a pile of vertebrae. An earthquake rattled in my head. Everything went sideways. I pulled over. "You've gotta drive me to the hospital." We switched seats. She drove. Fifteen minutes later I was breathing heavy, shirtless, on a cold, clean triage bed, with a Ugandan nurse trying to get EKG contacts to stick through my chest hair. Louise—seven months pregnant, in one of the two dresses she could still wear—the blue one—smiled and stood, holding my hand that was no longer numb. A Ugandan doctor replaced the nurse when she left. "You are the American who coaches basketball?" he said. I nodded. "You have been working too hard."

"He has," Louise said. I took my job seriously. I was a missionary. I took my calling seriously. I was assigned to Uganda Christian University, where I ran the athletic department and coached an elite basketball team in the National League. Several of my players had only one or no parents. The crowds were loud. I could not be a quiet coach. Sometimes I yelled at the refs. I yelled at my players more. I tried to father them.

The doctor put his hand on the right side of my chest. "I don't see any problem, but it would be wise for you to visit our cardiologist for reassurance. Call for an appointment tomorrow. Take some days off work, and come back for this appointment." He shook my hand. "But please, do not worry."

Three days later I cautiously drove myself to the hospital. The cardiologist was a large Vietnamese woman who sat in a rolling chair and motioned for me to sit in the wooden chair beside her. She never looked at my face. She spoke softly. "Remove the shirt," she said. She put gel on an apparatus and rolled it around the left side of my chest and rib cage for two minutes while watching a monitor I could not see. She then lifted a brown paper towel and said, "No problem." She sloppily wiped gel off my chest, never looking me in the eyes, then used the same paper towel to wipe gel off the apparatus.

I waited for her to say something else. She didn't. I didn't want to offend her. "I'm sorry?" I said.

Still not looking up, she said, "It is fine. You put back the shirt."

It is not fine now, way out here, looking for lions. My chest didn't hurt when the cardiologist did her thing. If it hurt like this while she was looking, what would she have seen? There's no way this pain is not visible. What would she have said? Would she have gotten up out of her chair to call someone? Would they have run in with a rolling bed and rushed me to the operating theater? Or rolled me to a helicopter and flown me to Nairobi? Or Johannesburg? Would I get nauseous in a helicopter if I was having a heart attack?

"Just there!" George says. I stop again. "No, drive a bit closer. You see her?"

"Yes!" Louise whispers and grabs my left arm with both hands and squeezes. "A lion!" I roll the windows halfway up.

George says, "It's okay. It's better to see." He notices me glance at his gun as I roll the windows back down and he grins. "You reverse a bit and then turn and go into the small grasses and we will see better. This one is not hunting. She is looking for the babies." I turn the wheel slightly and back up, then slowly inch forward into a patch of short green grass that slopes up to the lion. My heart speeds. She sits with her back turned to us, looking out over the land sloping down in front of her. "Stop the motor," George whispers. I do. Here, the grass is not as thick or as long. There are noises, but not as close or as loud. "Listen. The babies must be lost. She is calling for them."

Louise turns and looks at me, smiling, but with wet eyes I've seen before and could never forget. The wet eyes of a wife becoming an eternal mother.

Nine months before, in the same hospital she had rushed me to earlier, labor was being induced. Louise's face changed in a new way. Her mouth twisted and her eyes turned wet and red. "What is it?" I asked. It wasn't fear or sadness or pain. I'd seen those before.

"I don't know," she answered through clenched teeth. "Is this a contraction?" "Maybe it's like malaria," I said. "If you have it, you'll know. But if you're wondering if you have it, you don't have it."

That's what I walked around Uganda knowing—hints to help you determine whether or not you have a deadly disease. I walked around America knowing things like, "Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge" and "Righty tighty, lefty loosey." I don't know where I first heard the malaria advice, but I knew it was wisdom. I wanted to be the agent of such wisdom—to see reality clearly, simply, and put simple words to the clear reality.

The malaria advice didn't apply to contractions. Louise's battle had begun. Her eyes stayed wet as she fought, without pain relief, for her life and for the life of our daughter, Lily. She won. We all won.

Though not as wet and not in pain, her eyes are wet now in the same way, listening to the mother lion's moan that could be the moan of a sheep, but has more depth and a low rattle. Her babies are somewhere. Are they missing her? Crying for her? If George wasn't here, we would be talking about how the mother lion must feel the way we feel about Lily.

Can you imagine Lily, lost, by herself? Nine months old. She knows all she needs to know for the rest of her life. Her nine months' worth of eyes-open awareness mix with her nine muffled months in the dark warm womb-pool of eternity. They combine to form the purest possible understanding of everything every human being needs to know. But she is still completely dependent on other humans for survival. Her dependence burdens us and teaches us. We've never been apart from her this long. Is it wrong that we wanted to be apart from her for a night? We miss her. Is she missing us? Crying for us? Maybe she's relieved we're not there. Maybe she's relieved I'm not there with my chest pains and my trouble. Louise's wet eyes would turn angry at that suggestion and we would argue. That might lead to me telling her how afraid I am of death—how afraid I am of leaving her and Lily alone in the world.

The mother calls for the babies. The breeze carries her call away from us across the savanna. There's no way to know how long she's been there, calling them. I look back at George and he nods and I turn the key. The lioness does not respond. I reverse back onto the trail and continue in the direction we had been going.

Louise looks back at the lion mother. I rub the spot on my chest. Louise looks over. I stop rubbing and grab at the strap of the seat belt and shift in my seat and smile. I know what the rubbing does to Louise when she sees it. I'm not sure if she saw that one. What does the rubbing do for me? I shouldn't do it, at least not when she's around. It doesn't bring me comfort, but it does something. It's not really rubbing. I don't apply much pressure. It's really more like tracing. I lightly trace those three fingers in a small circle, over and over, above the pain—like I'm finger painting. I've dipped my fingers in dark red and I'm marking the spot so God can't miss it. It's prayer.

"We might see another lion, or a leopard." George points ahead. "Until we reach the other place with those trees, way far, we will see no other animals."
The trail straightens. I speed up and shift into third. Those trees are miles ahead. Louise opens the sun roof and stands up in her seat. I lift the pair of borrowed binoculars and tap her leg. She grabs them and rides with her elbows and binoculars raised.

It's Sunday. George and I are looking out windows. Louise stands up above. Should I talk to George about Jesus? At some point in the missionary enterprise, I was given a spiritual gifts assessment. Evangelism did not rate as a strength. Cynicism was not a category. I don't enjoy the westernized church services at the university where I work. I like church in the village, when it's drums and dancing and not in English. But in the village so many people stare. I enjoy confession and communion. But do we take communion every week? How can I not know? Do I have a brain tumor? I'm an Anglican missionary and I can't remember if I participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist weekly? Not a saved soul notch on my missionary belt. Just a basketball team, a wife, a kid and a mountain of fear. I'm a stumbling block. It's Sunday. George should be with his family in church right now—sweating and singing. God knows what he needs. Saint George. Maybe he needs to save me.

The chest pain has turned scratchy, the same way throat pain can be sharp or scratchy. When the pain turns scratchy it's like my heart is wrapped in an old, crusty shop towel and is pushing against the wall of my chest. Sometimes this is the beginning of it fading away. The pain turns scratchy, then I get a full body shiver, then I yawn, then it's gone. Sometimes.

When we reach the trees George pointed to earlier, Louise sits back down and wipes off her sunglasses. The trail bends to the right and rises. We slow and as we rise, the heads of three giraffes appear in front of us, chewing at the green leaves of two acacia trees. Louise says, "Look at that." The giraffes are two car lengths away from us. They stop eating and stare. I brake and turn off the ignition. The breeze, now gentle and warm, carries light danger sounds in through the open windows. A different legion of bugs and birds chirp and click to alert whoever is listening to the new danger.

George says, "They are many." Giraffes fill the windshield. All standing still and staring. I squint and nod at each giraffe and count exactly forty, spaced evenly throughout a formation that, to David Attenborough's helicopter, would appear in the shape of a Muslim moon, arching away from us, about one hundred yards from tip to tip. The three closest to us stand at the southern-most tip of the moon. I look into the face of the tallest of the three. He stares back at me with apparent anticipation of something, but at the same time completely at ease.

This is like the look of Ugandans who sit in front of their mud brick houses set a few feet off heavily trafficked side roads around urban and rural villages. Whenever we drive or walk by these people, many of them look up from what occupies them and stare at us. If there are children around, they run close to us and shout various dialectical pronunciations of "Mzungu," but the older folks only watch us. The stillness of their faces and their eyes and the stiffness of their posture is the same as the giraffes. Their eyes imply no possibility or desire for interaction, but they focus on us with a degree of intensity that seems to be involuntary. They have different hearts at different degrees of strength and health, different obstacles to survival, but none of them with any apparent fear. They never acknowledge our humanity unless we acknowledge theirs with a smile or a handshake. Then they smile, unfreeze and talk.

"There's forty, exactly. Get up there and take a look." I point to the open sun roof. Louise leans a little and stands up with a gleeful hiccup. She looks at them through the binoculars. She talks through the roof to George, not whispering but not shouting, adjusting her words and pace and pronunciation the way we always do when talking to Africans who don't know us well. "What is the problem with these ones? Their necks? They look like they are somehow wounded."

"For those, they have a skin disease. It will not cause death, but it cannot heal."

For a few seconds I study the long, wide, dark strip of what looks like scales running down the front of the tallest giraffe's neck. His eyes contain something the buffalo eyes did not. His condition will keep him from looking how he's supposed to look. How does the community respond? Is this why he's at the tip of the moon with the others who are diseased? This will—maybe already has—kept him out of the best documentaries.

In the distance, beyond his diseased neck and high shoulders, a body of water flattens the horizon.

Quick, sharp, stabbing chest pain. No longer scratchy. No shiver. No yawn.

I squint and wince and rub the spot and cough. I tug on a seam of Louise's pants, "Hey, lemme take a look." She lowers herself back into the car, her face full of joy—happy to let me have the binoculars. My desire to use the binoculars and stand to look out the sunroof shows her that I'm completely engaged. What she interprets as my enthusiasm fuels her enthusiasm. I stand. Scattered danger sounds grow louder outside, carried along the breeze. I stare at the diseased giraffe. Now I am sure he can see my eyes. He doesn't move his gaze. I turn quickly to see if he is looking over my head at a pride of roaring, prowling lions too distant for me to hear. There is nothing behind us but the trail that bends and disappears. Now that I'm standing and higher, the body of water on the horizon sits just below his head. I raise the binoculars and look out at the water and the dense gathering of trees that rises along the entire length of the opposite shore beyond the water.

"George, that water. That's Lake Albert?" No response. I ask again, into the car, "Is that Lake Albert?"

"Yes," George says.

That's the Congo. Two miles, maybe three.

This is real pain, worse than it's ever been. I'm having a heart attack two miles from the Congo jungle.

For the first time since leaving the lodge in the morning, I am sure of exactly where we are. I have a vague map of Uganda in my memory—the biggest dots are the hospital and the airport. When we drove in last night I put a pin in that memory map to mark the entrance to the park, just off the skinny and potholed two-lane road that cuts through the middle of the country, through Gulu to South Sudan. Beyond that pin, I knew we turned into the park and traveled another hour over trails, then on a two-car ferry boat across the Nile, then over more trails that brought us to the lodge. Since early morning we have been driving, slowly but steadily, stopping only for the buffalo, the mother lion, and now these giraffes. There are no shadows. It's noon. Lake Albert is on that memory map, in a sort of thin, diagonal, armpit position between Uganda and the Congo. I'm now a red pin on the edge of that blue armpit of water. At least five hours from that treacherous five-hour road leading back to Kampala. Ten hours from the hospital.

My heart speeds up in my ears.

The diseased giraffe keeps staring at my eyes.

The pain turns sharp, then pinches. This is new. Worse. I paint the spot. I can hear and feel my heart beating faster. My chest moves my shirt as my heart pounds. That's new. I flex my chest against my fingers and push. The spot is red, deep red, wet. I keep painting it and my heart speeds beneath the paint. Louise would tell me I've felt it before and didn't die. But this really is different.
Is this the beginning of death?

The jungle of the Congo blurs as I strain to focus on the black eyes of the skin-diseased giraffe.

What do you see in my eyes? Let's trade sadnesses. Disfigure me. I'll be disfigured if it means I can live. You can have this. You can wonder if you're dying—when you're dying. You know you could be attacked any second. You're ready right now. You're always listening and looking out. You'll see it coming. And when you have to, you'll run. You might make it. But if you don't, what will you really lose? Do these others really need you?

Me? I can't die. But I will if this is real. I'll die in the middle of your Africa.

He stares at me.

I stare at him.

He says, "If you are wondering if you are having a heart attack, you are not having a heart attack."

I make a fist with my left hand. It's hard to tell if anything is numb. I cough. I often cough when the pain hits, but I've never known why. Now I know: I need to spit it out. The pain is real. It's not in my head. I'll know when it hurts bad enough, then I'll cough up the pain. It's big—thick and heavy. But I can cough it up—yank it free of its roots with a primal survival cough and wretch—a bloody, wet, hairy, scratchy, black placenta of living pain. I'll puke it out and it'll bounce and roll onto the dirt and grass. I'll choke, gasp, spit blood, then show it my defiant bloody teeth, and drive—away from the Congo, giraffes, lions and buffalo—toward a glorious life free of pain and fear. The pain will lie behind me at the feet of the giraffes. Hyenas and vultures will smell it dying and leave what they're finishing to come fight each other for it.

I shiver. I yawn.