

The Empty Crater

I had to leave. I had to unlock the chain to the metal bars that imprisoned me. I had been in the dark pit for so long, I felt empty. Life dripped out of me at a very slow pace.

You wanted me to stay. You wanted things to be the same, to not change. You were content with the life you led and I did not thrive with contentment. You did not want to feel and the layers protecting you kept you on the cusp of emotional survival.

But I was not like you. I had to leave. I had to run away from the lie of a life I was leading. I had to run to me.

I boarded a flight for the journey to Africa. Not sure what I would find there, but it seemed both simplistic and exotic. Africa was speaking to me. It was saying, "Come." Perhaps I would feel a connection because I felt disconnected. I needed, wanted, had to --- *feel*.

My head is spinning. It is like someone is pulling a string from the top of my crown and all that is compressed in my skull is a psychedelic explosion of silvery colours twirling like a spinning top toy. Or maybe, it is the sky that is spinning. I don't know.

I lie back down on the sand. My soul is on fire. It feels like a hundred and fifty watt light bulb is plugged into a vein. I feel both alive and paralyzed. Something has been ignited inside me. It, or rather he, has hit me like a thunderbolt.

Who is this man, and what has he done to me?

Sounds of waves ending their journey across the Indian Ocean provide lulls to my racing heart. I focus on the salt that tingles my lips and the rays of sun peeking through the trees. Fan-leafed palms swaying in the breeze hush me into a dreamy trance as if I am floating above.

I enter the tented bedroom. It is beautiful; teak floor, leather cushioned chairs and luxurious fabrics. In the heavenly slumber zone of serenity, a sheer curtain hangs over the bed creating a romantic and mysterious oasis.

A tied-back tarp leads to an outdoor stone terrace with views only magic can create. A small teak table and two cushioned chairs beg for companions to sit with a glass of wine, and to be still under the African spell.

My outdoor bath has been drawn and it is almost overflowing with bubbles and flower pedals. The scent of rose, and fragrant-whiffs from the acacia tree, weave together in a way two scents dare to cross.

I feel my body's sweat and the dust that layered my skin being released as each of my limbs sway ever so slowly in my bathtub soak. I sip French fizz and marinate in bubbles. I feel as if a fairy princess waved her wand of blissful sparkles over me. My senses are alive and joy lurks within.

I slip on a sleeveless dress and flat sandals. Instead of a hairdryer, I let the warm air create soft curls. I walk along the wooden walkway to the safari lodge terrace and order a gin and tonic from the waiter. At the edge of the terrace, I sip my drink and look out to the vastness. The sky begins to form shades of yellow, orange, reddish-brown and tangerine.

I turn around and walk to the table where delicately crafted canapés have been placed. A man walks out on to the terrace. He is tall and lean, and gives the impression of one who is confident. His hair is light and his skin is rather pale. He wears dark trousers and a light blue shirt. He looks casually dapper.

An electric bolt runs through my veins. He is a stranger to me yet somehow, my soul seems to recognize him.

He approaches me. My body quivers at first but then feels at ease in his presence. We talk as if we have known each other forever. Perhaps we have. We laugh in a way one would think we have secrets. Light surrounds our vibration; invisible shocks ping-pong between us.

A knock on the door awakens me. I turn on the lamp and a soft glow outlines his face. He looks peaceful, as if all that has weighed him down in the past has been lifted. He is beautiful. I turn to get up and he pulls me towards him. Our embrace is brief.

It is dark as our open-sided jeep drives along the dirt road. The cool air presents a chill but the blanket keeps me warm. He keeps me warm.

A propane tank is lit and the torch inflates the colossal multi-coloured balloon. The basket is carried upright and we climb in. As we rise into the sky, my heart pounds profusely.

The smile on his face is like that of a child viewing Santa's gifts under the Christmas tree. I want to take him in my arms and hold him forever. I feel as if we are floating up and away to a secret place, drifting above like birds on a leisurely Sunday afternoon.

The sun has risen and Mother Nature's beastly luxuriousness roams below – zebras run gracefully, impalas balletically dash about and elephants with heavy feet, move slowly. Giraffes, oh-so beautiful with their long strong necks and comical looking little heads, skip along the savanna.

A long table has been set up on the mustard-coloured grassy plain. In the distance, three giraffes stand near a crooked acacia tree. Behind them, a mountain range drapes between the veld and the sky creating a dramatic setting.

Champagne toasts a brilliant balloon safari. The chef prepares eggs and bacon. The aroma of robust coffee meshes with the breeze. Fresh orange juice is poured and warm bread is passed around. He and I sit beside each other and underneath the table linen, we hold hands.

His smile is mischievous, similar to that of a little boy who has a frog in his pocket and is ready to tease a girl. He is playful. The light shining from our souls is intoxicating. Everyone wants to talk to us, be around us ... come into our light.

We drive along the rugged dirt road. Our guide stops and shuts off the jeep's engine. Behind us, a pack of exquisite-looking zebras gallop our way.

I instinctively duck behind him. He laughs at the absurdity of my survival technique. These striped wild horses are powerful and no man can protect me if charged. But I feel protected by him.

We drive further into the park and spot a family of elephants. They are stationary. Their tails wag lazily and their floppy ears scarcely move. They appear lethargic and content. They are majestic but delicate, mighty yet vulnerable.

A few kilometres down the road, we stop again. Our guide spots a male lion lolling in the grass. He is magnificent. He is powerful, yet, in this moment he is tender. His symmetrical face is beautiful and intricate. His mane is full and messy.

The lion looks at us as if we are simply taking a smoke break in his playground. Our eyes lock and for a brief moment, we connect. I am not afraid of this beast nor is he afraid of me.

We lie in the outdoor tub. Darkness is offset by a velvet glow from lit candles strewn about. Bubbles drip off my skin as I reach for our drinks.

We sip champagne and with our fingers, place pieces of smoked salmon topped with caviar into our mouths. The fleshy sweet salmon and salty caviar are beautifully enhanced by the frosty bubbles.

Howls from hyenas echo through the darkness. A lion roars in the distance. Rumbles of savanna wildlife interrupt silent moments. It is African savannah singing a cappella. We are exposed but we feel safe. It is natural and unnatural, euphoric and forbidding.

We are bare in our vulnerability yet we do not feel naked. I am in a place where no words can be articulated. It is a place of muted awe. I feel an overwhelming sense of belonging to the land, and to him. I want to be in Africa forever. I want to be with him forever.

We embrace as if it is our final good-bye. We hold each other in oneness. My heart screams. I don't want to let him go. My body shakes as waves of emotion erupt. Sadness is etched on his face.

He walks away, climbs up the steps and turns to look at me before entering the Cessna. He closes the door, starts the engine, pushes in the throttle and taxis down the dirt runway. He is airborne.

Lying on the beach, I shake out of my dozy state. The line between reality and dream is blurred. A sense of sadness sinks within. The palm trees sway as the sun begins its journey west. The sounds of the Indian Ocean's waves seem a million miles away. A tear runs down my cheek.

A shadow crosses my body. I sense a presence and open my eyes. He is standing over me and the empty crater within my soul fills with a feeling of finally, being home.