

Africa · Ann Patchett

ONE

“BOO.” GEORGIA OPENED the closet door and peered inside. She could hear Lewis’ light breathing and make out the shape of his small shoes in the darkness behind the coats. “When someone says ‘Boo’ you’re supposed to say ‘Boo’ back at them. Otherwise it’s bad luck.” The silence continued for a while.

“Boo.” Lewis said.

“Well, you’re safe for now.” Georgia went into the closet and shut the door. It was big enough for both of them to sit comfortably and so she sat down. Closets were like sanctuaries to her, places to go, and so she kept them cleaner than the rest of her home, forgoing the safety of moth balls for the clean smell of lavender. “Not a bad place you’ve got here, mind if I stay awhile?”

“No.” Lewis said.

“I like a good closet. If you’ve got a closet you know you’ve always got a place to get away to, someplace where you can go to think things out. That’s how I figured out you’d be here. You strike me as the kind of person who’d know about these things.” She waited for a minute to see if he wanted to jump in. “I used to spend lots of time in the closet when I was your age, but my mother, she wasn’t a closet person, she was an attic person. I’d go away to think and she’d start hunting for me up in the attic, since that’s where she liked to go. But me, I was always in the closet.” There was some shuffling and then Lewis stretched out his legs. “You don’t have galoshes on, did you know that?”

“Yes.”

Georgia opened the closet door just enough for a crack of light to fall through. “Here,” she said, handing him a pair of heavy black overshoes, “you can wear mine and I’ll wear your dad’s. You should always wear galoshes when you go into the closet to think. But you should wear somebody else’s.”

“How do you know?” The voice came from several folds of wool.

“Well, I didn’t know at first, I just sort of did it by accident, and it made everything work out okay. Some of the most important things in

the world are discovered by accident. So I figured if it was the right thing to do once, I'd better keep doing it, you know?" They both pulled them on and Georgia shut the door again. They sat there for a few minutes.

"Jesus Christ is in hell." Lewis said.

"What?"

"He went to hell before the first Easter and now he has to go back every year because I do bad things."

"Lewis, who told you that?" Georgia whispered.

"Sister Lawrence Mary said so in school today, that he's there right now and he'll have to stay there until Sunday."

Georgia crawled back behind the wall of coats and pulled her son into her lap. The front of his shirt was damp from crying, but he wasn't crying now, he was stiff and resigned. "Why is it because of you?"

"He knows everything I've done that's bad, even the things I haven't done yet, and it makes him go to hell."

She rested her chin in the coolness of his hair. "You haven't done anything bad, Baby, and even if you did, Christ would understand, he knows how it is with us. And all that other stuff about his going away, that's just a story they put out to fool people. He isn't in hell, I promise you."

"Sister Lawrence Mary says she always tells us the truth."

Georgia flinched, but in the darkness it went unseen. "She thought she was telling the truth because she believed the story too, everybody believes the story unless they know different."

"How do you know different?" Lewis said.

"Now you listen to me because this is a secret, a big secret that my father told me so I can tell you. Jesus Christ goes to Africa, every year right about now, he goes there to think about things the way other people go to the closet. Your grandpa met him there once, just by accident, that's how I know."

"Are you going to tell Sister Lawrence Mary?"

"She probably wouldn't believe me. It's the kind of thing you have to see for yourself, or at least be related to someone who's seen it. I used to think one day I'd go there and find him, and the two of us would spend all sorts of time together, going around the watering holes and counting zebras, that it would be the best time ever."

Lewis looked up at her, she couldn't see him, but she could feel his warm breath on her face as he spoke. "Why didn't you go?"

Georgia thought about it. “Because I got older, and I started trying to figure it all out logically, things like where I’d go when I got off the plane and how long it would take me to get there, and the more I thought about it, the more it just seemed too hard and so I decided not to think about it anymore. Maybe I was afraid.”

“That it wasn’t true?” Lewis said, his voice shaking a little.

Georgia loved him utterly. “No, that he would be there and I’d miss him, but now I know it’s something you’ve just got to believe in. You can’t hold it in your hand and you can’t draw a map to where it is, but you know it’s there. When you do go, you can’t think about it too much, you’ve got to act like you remember and you’ve done it a hundred times before, like walking through your bedroom with the lights off.”

“And we’ll go to Africa one day?”

“Okay,” she said.

“And I’ll take you to where he is,” Lewis said, “I won’t ever think about it.”

“Okay,” she said, pulling him closer to her, “okay.”

Two

“Do you play poker?”

Harry heard the question as if it were being asked from a long way away. He didn’t think about giving an answer, but instead took the sentence apart, going over each word separately in his mind.

“Do you play poker?” The voice was louder now.

Maybe it was a dream, maybe it was part of a questionnaire, a hospital admissions form: Have you been here before? Did you have any childhood diseases? Do you play poker? He moved his tongue and felt several smooth objects, like freshwater pearls, floating inside his mouth, homeless. He took these to be his teeth.

“Hey, are you listening to me?”

Harry pulled open his eyes. They felt like windows swollen shut in the heat. The sun was at twelve o’clock, straight above his head, and the sky had a horrible cast of green. He shut them tightly. Two hands pulled the collar of his leather jacket and sat him upright. There was a shooting pain in his back, the same pain he would have for years after this, whenever he tried to lift more than a sack of groceries.

“Nothing’s broken, I checked already. You’ve got a few scratches and a nasty lump on the head, but all in all I’d say you were a pretty lucky guy. Would a drink help? You can sit here for a few minutes and have a drink then we’ll walk over to my place and play a couple of hands. Your legs are fine.”

Harry nodded and opened his eyes again. The man positioned himself so as to cast a shadow over him, making the light seem bearable. His hand trembled a bit as he took the glass which was tall and well frosted, the word “Falstaff” lettered in red on the side. He spit a couple of teeth onto the grass.

The man bent over and began picking them up. “You should save these.” He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped them up. “They’re doing wonderful things with dentistry now, they should be able to put them all back.” He slipped the little bundle into Harry’s pocket. “Drink up, I think you’ll like it. Sidecar. I like to think I’m one of the few people around who still makes a good sidecar.”

Harry drank. The sugared ice and brandy felt good on the cut in his mouth and down the back of his dried throat.

“We should probably be going pretty soon. I don’t think those trees are going to hold that plane much longer.”

Harry looked up and saw his plane, his dear plane which represented a second mortgage on his home and his entire life’s work, balancing above his head. A burning wheel landed a few feet away and the man got up to stamp down the fire in the grass. He had been right, nothing was broken. Harry discovered this as he jumped to his feet and pulled the two of them away from the cluster of trees, just as the left wing came in for its final descent.

“See, you’ll be fine, maybe a little concussion, but I’ll keep you awake. Here, give me your arm, we don’t have very far to go.”

The two of them set out across the veldt arm in arm. The grass was dry and yellowed and it made sharp snapping sounds beneath their feet. For a moment Harry tried to think, going southeast of Zambia, three hundred miles. The fuselage, it had something to do with that, he was sure, but the particulars made his head swim. He could not remember the going down. At least he knew who he was, but he didn’t know where he was, how long he’d been there, or who the person walking beside him was. In light of everything that had happened, it didn’t seem very important, he just

felt quiet, quiet and content to be alive. He relaxed and put more of his weight on the man's arm.

Before too long they arrived at a giant gum tree, stretching side to side nearly a full city block. Rain trees were sensible, equipped to think ahead to the long summer months. They sent their roots crawling deep, past the dryness, down to the places where the water moved underground. They soaked away every drop, in the roots, the giant trunk, through the branches and to the leaves, which stiffened in the sun and grew as big as dinner plates. Harry imagined it was probably as high as it was wide but he didn't want to roll his head back to look. There were two deck chairs with white linen cushions and between them a card table with a pitcher of sidecars.

"Have another," the man said, taking the glass which Harry still held in his hand. "These chairs are my pride and joy, the very chairs that Zelda and Scott sunned in when they first took the Queen Elizabeth to France." Harry received the drink and looked at the chairs, nodding appreciatively. "You don't find craftsmen like that anymore." Harry wondered whether he meant Fitzgerald or the person who made the chairs, but any sort of question made his head ache. He rubbed his temples with his fingers. "Do you want something for that? I have some aspirin back in the tent." Harry nodded almost imperceptibly and the man walked around to the other side of the tree.

Alone, Harry sat down on the edge of the chair and tried to keep his mind completely blank. He heard the sound of dry grass behind him and looked up for his friend, but instead he found a lioness, much bigger than the ones in the zoo. When she roared her breath smelled of old antelope meat. There was no point in trying to make it to the tree, even if he got there first, the cat was probably a better climber. I have survived a plane crash in the middle of Africa only to be eaten by a lion, Harry thought. The events of the day stood between him and blind panic. "I have a wife," he whispered to the animal, a fact he had just remembered, "Joan, and a little girl, Georgia. She's eight." The lion eyed him, dangling her tongue from one side of her open mouth.

The man reappeared. "Bufferin, is that okay?" The lion roared again. "Hush," he said, stretching out on the other chair and handing the bottle to Harry. The lion walked around to the end of the chair and butted her head against the man's long, tan feet. He rubbed his toes against her fore-

head until she fell asleep in the shade. “Sort of sounds like a toaster, doesn’t she?”

“Yours?” Harry asked.

The man shrugged, “Not really.”

“I’ve got a wife, Joan, and a daughter Georgia. She’s eight.”

The man smiled as if genuinely touched. “I like children.”

Harry nodded and swallowed the aspirin. He had forgotten the point he wanted to make. “Oh,” he said finally, “I’ll be wanting to get back to them.”

“There won’t be a search plane coming through for a few days, but it’s fine if you want to stay here with me, I like the company.”

“You don’t think they’ll send one right away?”

“Not on Easter weekend. The guys that run the air control in Zambia are all Catholics, they shut down the strip and take off for three days.”

“For Easter?”

The man looked a little hurt. “Why not for Easter?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, it just doesn’t seem like the kind of thing you close an airport over.”

“No, I guess not.” He picked up a copy of *Vanity Fair* from beneath the chair and began to flip through it.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, “are you Catholic?”

“Non-affiliated.”

“But Monday, do you think they’ll come Monday?”

“Did you register a flight plan?”

Harry tried to remember. All he was really sure of was buying a pack of spearmint gum from a woman with a red cloth tied around her head. He didn’t want to think about it anymore, his brain felt clouded and tender; it was in no mood to digest logic. He stretched back and put both hands over his eyes.

“I don’t think you should be going to sleep. Come on and sit up and we’ll play a game of poker.”

Harry uncovered his eyes. The sun was beginning to set in a great, orange streak.

“You do play poker, don’t you?”

Harry nodded. The man picked up the cards and smiled greedily. “Seven Card No Peek, red nines wild.” When he shuffled it was almost as if his hands left his wrists. They went everywhere. The cards shot up

through the air and wafted down to the table, where they were spread, sliced, and stacked in so many different patterns that there appeared to be no pattern at all. Harry was mesmerized. Even though the speed made his stomach churn, it all seemed to make some sort of sense. The deck smacked down in front of him. "Cut?" Harry shook his head. "So you've got a little girl?" He gave them each four cards, face down.

"Eight years last month."

"Isn't that something? They grow so fast. I never realized it would all go so quickly."

"You're telling me."

Harry's first card up was the three of clubs. His friend got the ace of hearts. Harry looked at one of them and then the other until he wasn't sure who had what.

"Do you have a picture?"

"Three of clubs?"

"In your wallet, may I see a picture of your daughter?"

Harry brightened, he loved showing this off. After looking through his shirt and jacket, he came across the wallet in his back pocket. "There she is," he tapped the plastic cover, "there's my girl."

It was taken on her birthday. There was a smudge of chocolate frosting on the front of her pale green dress. "Well, would you look at her." The man smiled and nodded. "She's something, all right."

The man got another ace and a red nine, Harry got a seven and the Jack of spades. "You can tell your girl I said she's always welcome here."

Harry looked up from the cards. "Oh, that's nice." Regardless of who was dealing, Harry felt as if all the games he won were thrown to him, but he was having a wonderful time nevertheless. They played until after the sun went down, played until they had burned through two sets of candles, and watched the sun come back, and then they played again. Unlike everything else, the cards did not make Harry's head ache. The cards made good sense.

THREE

Georgia was sitting in the hall closet between her father's galoshes, her head leaning back against his winter coat. She had brought down a stack of his undershirts from his dresser drawer and would push them hard

against her face; they smelled like him, like clean white sheets on a clothesline, like the ocean. She knew that his grey hat was on the shelf above her, and that behind the coats was the baseball bat he had as a child, the bat he had just last month started teaching her to use. She knew she was a good hitter too, she did it just like he showed her, one leg slightly bent, arms locked solid, her eyes squinted against the sun. She believed her father did not pull back when he sent his famous curve ball hurling across the lawn because she did not pull back when she sliced into it, clean and straight, the crack of the bat blending with her father's long, low whistle. He would say God knew what He was doing when He gave him a daughter as she climbed onto his back for a ride home.

Now Georgia was sure God knew nothing at all.

She was looking at an Easter card that her aunt had sent her, post-marked from the week before when a piece of mail or the two dollars folded inside it might have meant something. Now she hated it, hated the rabbit on the front, hated the message that she read over and over again because there was nothing else to do. She began tearing up the card into tiny pieces and throwing it into the corner and when that was done, pulled the huge galoshes on over her shoes. She decided to wear them until her feet grew to size. Once she had settled on this she felt a little better and opened the door a crack for air. She heard her mother say, "Oh my God," and the sound of something heavy falling, like an ashtray or a lamp. Georgia started to run into the other room, but the shoes slowed her, making her clump and slap down the hall as if it were some sort of game. She shuffled into the kitchen where her mother sat on the floor, the receiver of the phone still in her hand. Georgia tried to stand her up. Mothers shouldn't be on the floor. Her mother said, "Oh my God," five or six times without any inflection until she felt her daughter pulling at her, as if from someplace far away. Then she took Georgia's shoulders and pulled them hard against her chest. "Georgia, Daddy isn't dead. Daddy is coming home."

Time works differently for children, because it seemed like just a few minutes later (her mother said just short of thirty-two hours) that he was standing there. Georgia knew it was her doing, because she had slept in galoshes, hung her feet over the side of the tub and washed only to her knees when she took her bath that morning. It was her good thinking that brought him back to the entry hall where for a second they all stood and stared at each other with disbelief. Her father was tall and very handsome,

everyone said so, and what struck her right off was how tan he was and that there was a tear in his leather jacket. He sailed her onto his hip and took Mother in his arms and kissed her, just like Fredric March kisses Myrna Loy in "The Best Years of Our Lives." But there hadn't been a war, he was flying vaccinations to a remote section of Africa, a rain forest with landing strips just big enough for Cessnas. Of course, she didn't know any of this until years later, when they could talk about it without her mother bursting into tears and having to leave the room. Even then they didn't say much. His plane had gone down at the edge of the jungle, some natives had found the wreckage, charred and twisted, hanging from several gum trees. What else could they have assumed? That night her father came into her room. "You going to take those shoes off now?"

She shook her head, feeling suddenly shy, even though he had only been gone a week. The covers stood up in great mountains around her feet and her father began to laugh his same, wonderful laugh. "What am I going to do when it rains? I can't go around with wet feet."

Georgia thought about this and then pushed the shoes out from beneath the bedspread. He pulled them off as gently as if he had been removing a band-aid from her knee. "Tomorrow I think you should stay home from school and the three of us will go out and get you a pair of rubbers that really fit. Did you say your prayers?"

Georgia nodded, even though there were no prayers left to say.

He sat down on the edge of her bed. "I love you, Georgia Peach." She twisted around and clung to him tightly. It seemed as if the bed had fallen away and the two of them were suspended from the lip of some terrible cliff, that if she were to let go they would fall into that great stomach of darkness and be alone.

She asked him, what was in Africa?

"Well, I got a pretty bad bump on the head, so there's a lot of it I'm not sure about."

She told him he could remember.

Although his eyes were clearly on Georgia's face, it seemed to her that he couldn't see her. "I know I saw a lion, and there were spiders as big as my fist. Everything looked green. The sky was so blue and the grass was so yellow that after awhile your eyes sort of ran it all together. That sky was big, bigger than the ocean, so big I couldn't figure out why there wasn't any room for my plane." He stood up, as if he had just remembered

something. Georgia held tightly to his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. Together they went and looked out her window, as if the details of the story might be hidden somewhere out in the yard. "At night, Baby, there were stars. Big ones, little ones, so many that every couple of minutes one jumps right out and you start to think that maybe if you walked around long enough you might be able to find one. But that's just about the biggest place in the world, no place to wander around. Someday I'll take you there," he was talking to the night, "would you like that?"

She didn't answer, she pressed her face deep into the curve of his neck and loved him for coming home.

"Georgia," he said quietly, "Georgia, look at me. Do you know what's in Africa?"

FOUR

Jesus Christ pulled his deck chair out into the sun and sipped a sidecar. When it got too hot he turned over the cushions and lay on the cool undersides, moving the tree a little closer for shade. If it wasn't for the fact the ice in his drink never melted you might have thought he was just an ordinary man. He was thinking about baseball, wishing he didn't always know who was going to win. He should have been contemplating Easter, but it all seemed like such a long time ago. If it wasn't for this trip every year he might have forgotten about it altogether.

Sometimes he was tired of the whole business. Pouring himself another drink from the pitcher he kept beneath the chair, he wished he could play cards with someone and talk about what it was like to be young. Occasionally there was a bushman or someone who was in the neighborhood accidentally, it helped pass the time, but this year was quiet. This year he was bored. It wasn't such a good afternoon, the drinks were going to his head and he felt like he was getting a sunburn. To keep from getting lonely he sang some old German folksongs he knew. Jesus Christ had a very nice voice. He took comfort in knowing that tomorrow was Easter and all of this would be over. If he woke up early enough, he'd be home in time for breakfast.