

child of lions



*A play
by
Jared Michael Delaney*

"My soul is among lions" - Psalms 57: 4

"The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God" - William Blake

"One must be a lion to terrify the wolves" - Machiavelli

***"I want to run like the lions/Free from their cages/Free from the rages/Burning in my soul
tonight" - Little Steven***

The events of this play, while fictional, are inspired by an actual incident that was reported on June 9, 2005.

Characters

Marc, a reporter

Melissa, his editor

The Police Sergeant

The Guide

The Warlord

The Father

The Woman

The Lions

The roles of Melissa, the Guide and the Woman are played by the same cast member. Same goes for the roles of the Sergeant, the Warlord and the Father.

The Lions are an entity in and of themselves and may be created however the director and design team feel is best to serve the production.

SCENE 1:

Lights rise. It is a cluttered office of some kind. Two people are sitting across a desk from each other, Marc and Melissa.

MARC: All right, wait, hold on now--

MELISSA: No, I will NOT hold on now, this is absurd.

MARC: If you'd give me a chance to--

MELISSA: To do what? Marc, this is simply not true.

MARC: You don't know that, how could you know that?

MELISSA: I know it because it's common sense!

MARC: What does that mean?

MELISSA: Jesus Marc, seriously? Get it together would you.

MARC: You're saying I have no--

MELISSA: I'm saying that you're not at your best at the moment and that perhaps you're a bit susceptible to--

MARC: The BBC reported it, Mel.

MELISSA: So what?

MARC: It's the *BBC*. Not "Joe-I'm-huddled-in-my-dark-corner-of-the-internet-and-please-look-at-me" guy.

MELISSA: You think the Brits never make a mistake?

MARC: Mel--

MELISSA: I'd say colonizing India was a big one.

MARC: Mel--

MELISSA: Spice Girls too.

MARC: Melissa--

MELISSA: Marc, this story is *apocryphal*. There's no hard evidence to back it up.

MARC: But the BBC--

MELISSA: Fuck the BBC. No one believes that a 12-year-old girl was rescued from slave traders by a pride of lions.

MARC: More than one news outlet reported this story.

MELISSA: And not one of them had a name for this girl. No interviews. No footage.

MARC: But the police reports--

MELISSA: --are *not* conclusive. Also, Marc, it was *ten years ago*.

MARC: Yeah...?

MELISSA: So how are you going to track this down?

MARC: I'm going to find the girl. Find the lions.

MELISSA: Find the girl, find the lions.

MARC: Yes.

MELISSA: The girl with no name? And the lions, also presumably without names?

MARC: Yes.

MELISSA: How?

A beat.

MARC: Get to Ethiopia. Get to that village. Track down the police captain. Get a name.

MELISSA: What's if she's dead?

MARC: Well I--

MELISSA: What if she moved? What if there's no way to track her?

MARC: I thought--

MELISSA: What if it's just a story?

MARC: What if it's not?

A pause.

MELISSA: What does that even mean? "Find the lions."

MARC: I'll hire a guide.

MELISSA: Who also tames lions and can speak to them?

MARC: I'm saying if the lions can be found, those specific lions, it would be proof.

MELISSA: Proof that's there's lions in Africa?

MARC: Mel...

MELISSA: Marc, do you understand what it is you're asking me? You want me to approve a trip to Africa so you can chase down a story which may only be local gossip.

MARC: I know what it sounds like, I do, but if I can find her--

MELISSA: Why?

MARC: What?

MELISSA: Why this? Why is this the thing?

MARC: I don't know exactly.

MELISSA: How did you even hear about it?

MARC: I was out with a friend the other night and we were talking about, I don't know, the environment or something. Global warming and the end of the world and all this. And I said something about great extinctions and how stupid we could be and the lion came up. The one shot by the doctor, you know?

MELISSA: Dentist.

MARC: Right, dentist. And I was saying that there wouldn't be lions left in the world and how awful that would be. And my buddy said something about it being ironic and how lions have saved people. And I asked what he meant and he told me this story. About a young girl who was to be sold into slavery and raped and how a pride of lions came out of nowhere and saved her. Stood guard over her until the police arrived. Kept the slavers away. And it just...I don't know...it just *struck* me. The power of that. The image of that. A girl, kept safe from predators by one of the greatest predators on Earth. For no other reason that because it was decent. That it was the right thing to do. Because to take a child like that is wrong. And even an animal knows that. Those lions were better than men at the moment. What does that say about us? As a species. You know? Think on that for minute. What does that say?

A beat.

MELISSA: Yeah we're all terrible.

MARC: That's not what I'm--

MELISSA: Go ahead Marc. You can go on your trip there, but it works like this: If you don't file a story that has actual value, strong proof and multiple confirmed sources, all expenses are coming out of your end, is that clear?

MARC: Yeah, it's clear.

MELISSA: You will also most likely be fired.

MARC: Yeah I figured that too.

MELISSA: All right. I will set it up.

MARC: Thanks Mel.

MELISSA: Go.

MARC: Gone.

Marc gets up to leave.

MELISSA: You're probably going to be eaten by something.

MARC: Probably.

He leaves.

Lights fade.

SCENE 2:

A busy police station. There are sounds of phones ringing and general bustling. Marc is sitting at a desk, looking worse for wear. Pale, sweating and uncomfortable. He has been waiting for a long time. Phones continue to ring.

MARC: (holding his head) Isn't anyone--?

He looks around. He can't find anyone to help.

MARC: The phones? Isn't anyone going to--?

The ringing grows louder.

MARC: Goddammit!

He picks up the phone on the desk.

MARC: Hello? What? No...no...wait! Slow down. I'm not a-- what? Why do I speak English so well? Cause I'm English. American. I'm American. Yeah. Yeah. What? No. I don't know. There isn't anyone--I can't help you. How can I--? Yeah. Call back. Yeah sorry. Call back.

He hangs up the phone, puts his head back in his head.

MARC: Jesus, my fucking head hurts.

A police sergeant has entered and is looking at Marc.

SERGEANT: You know they say Jesus was Ethiopian.

MARC: (startled) What?

SERGEANT: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you.

MARC: What did you say?

SERGEANT: Jesus. The Messiah.

MARC: Yeah?

SERGEANT: He may have been from here. From Ethiopia.

MARC: (at a loss) I never heard that.

SERGEANT: Oh yes. Scientists say it is very likely indeed that he was African. And Ethiopia isn't so very far away from Jerusalem. Making this land a strong contender for his birthplace.

A beat.

MARC: Wasn't Jesus Jewish?

SERGEANT: So they say.

MARC: ...lot of Ethiopian Jews, are there?

SERGEANT: (laughing) Oh more than you would think.

A beat.

MARC: (extending his hand) I'm--

SERGEANT: (interrupting) I know who you are. The writer. From America.

MARC: Reporter, actually.

SERGEANT: Doesn't a reporter write?

MARC: Yeah. Yes. I suppose so.

A beat. The Sergeant staring at Marc with a knowing look.

MARC: I've been waiting here quite a while.

SERGEANT: Have you?

MARC: I have.

SERGEANT: Hm.

MARC: There doesn't seem to be much staff.

SERGEANT: People are busy. People are working. They don't have time to stay in the office all day. And write.

MARC: Ah ha. Right. Got it. What about the phones?

SERGEANT: What about them?

MARC: The constant...ringing. Doesn't it drive you crazy? Makes my head hurt.

SERGEANT: Yes you don't look well.

MARC: Yeah I'm not well. Not at all well.

SERGEANT: First time in Africa?

MARC: It is, yes.

SERGEANT: Hm.

MARC: It was the travel. You know? The distance. The air pressure in the plane. It's taking...it's taking longer to wear off that I thought it would. The air is so recycled and you're just breathing in what everyone else is breathing out. And it feels like it settles on your face. Like a film. That just covers...*everything*. You know? And you can't get it off. Even after struggling to get to the restroom and splashing water on your face. It doesn't even feel like real water. It's something else recycled and manufactured and it isn't real and doesn't provide any relief. And then you get hot. Well I get hot. My internal temperature, it, it rises. Not to say I have a fever, it's not that. It's something else. Like these waves of hot needles over me. They start in my belly and then crash over me, until they *crackle* off of my head. Do you know what I mean? This terrible heat. It's so...so very...uncomfortable. It's like nausea. But it's *not* nausea. Does that make any sense? And you're never getting off the plane. Ever. You're trapped there. In a metal tube. And you'll never get out. And it will never land. Even when you see the runway rushing up beneath you, it

feels like you'll never actually get out of the plane. And then there's that moment. The moment when you've finally landed and you're still sitting in your seat and you can feel your body *lurching* forward. Railing against your brain to let it move, to get it off this damn plane. That's the worst, isn't it? It feels...it all feels wretched. In those moments, those long flights, I often think that the speed isn't worth it. That the speed of flight isn't worth the wretchedness. Like how much more pleasant would it be if you could be on the deck of a ship? And the sun and the wind in your face and clean air and real water and you're not...not fucking *trapped* in a metal tube that spends its time defying the laws of physics. That the lengthening of the voyage would be worth the lack of wretchedness.

A beat.

SERGEANT: What if you get seasick?

A beat.

MARC: Anyway- I'm still feeling it, I suppose.

SERGEANT: I suppose so.

A beat. The phones have continued to ring but the frequency and volume has been decreasing. Over the course of the next few lines of dialogue, the ringing stops entirely.

MARC: So the phones...doesn't anyone...?

SERGEANT: They stop eventually.

MARC: I answered one.

SERGEANT: Yes. I saw.

MARC: I'm sorry if I shouldn't have--I just couldn't take it.

SERGEANT: They'll call back.

Another beat with the Sergeant looking at Marc with some knowledge.

MARC: I'm sorry but it occurs to me I don't know who--

SERGEANT: Oh! Me? Yes, the sergeant. I'm the police sergeant at this station.

MARC: Ah right. Ok. Good. I think I was supposed to meet you.

SERGEANT: Yes I believe so.

A beat.

MARC: I was waiting a long time.

SERGEANT: I was working.

MARC: Yes. Of course.

Another beat.

SERGEANT: (*taking a seat at his desk*) So what is it I can do for you?

MARC: Yes, right. Thank you. I'm here...I've come here to do a...a...a follow-up on something that happened about 10 years ago.

SERGEANT: And what was that?

MARC: The girl. The little girl saved by the lions?

Silence.

MARC: Are you familiar with--? If I understood correctly, you were the officer involved with the case.

A beat.

SERGEANT: There were several of us.

MARC: No, yes of course. But I mean, from I what understood, you were the one speaking to the press, the one who was there when she was--

SERGEANT: Found.

MARC: Found, yes.

A beat.

MARC: I'm sorry, is there a problem?

SERGEANT: What exactly is it you are looking for?

MARC: Well, it's the--I mean--most people, most people in the, in the *West*, they're not sure what to make of this, you know? This story. A lot of people don't believe it. I only became aware of it recently myself.

SERGEANT: Is that so?

MARC: Yes. And it just...to say it blew me away is understating it. I wanted to follow up on it, to see if I could find--

SERGEANT: Find the girl.

MARC: Yes. And talk to her.

SERGEANT: To what end?

MARC: What?

SERGEANT: To what end? Why do you want to talk to her?

MARC: To hear her story! To hear from her what that was like. To see how that moment changed her life. How it affected...I mean, she must be...what? 22, 23 now? A young woman. Saved from...

SERGEANT: Saved from what?

A beat.

MARC: I don't know, I guess.

SERGEANT: Indeed. So. You wish to track down this woman and...what? Interview her about her life?

MARC: Yes, exactly. And learn about the lions.

SERGEANT: Ah yes. The lions.

MARC: Yes, where are they now? What happened to them. That kind of behavior is so *rare*.

SERGEANT: Is it?

MARC: From what I understand, yes.

SERGEANT: From what you understand.

MARC: Yes.

A pause.

MARC: Have I done something to offend you?

A beat.

SERGEANT: Have you ever seen a lion?

MARC: Yes. Sure. Of course.

SERGEANT: In a zoo. On television. On the computer.

MARC: Yes.

SERGEANT: But never in the bush. Never where they live.

A beat.

MARC: No.

SERGEANT: I see. And yet you feel comfortable enough to say what behavior is rare and what isn't.

MARC: I wasn't trying to--

SERGEANT: A lion is something that you cannot ever understand. It cannot be done. They have golden eyes. So how could you know something that has golden eyes?

MARC: I don't know.

SERGEANT: Indeed. Yet you presume that you can.

MARC: I didn't mean to--I just wanted--I wanted to know *what* happened to that girl. After that moment.

A pause.

SERGEANT: Allow me to tell you something: Ethiopia is a difficult place. Africa is a difficult place. It is *not* Europe. It is *not* America. It is something else entirely. That is what has not been understood by the West. Why should this child, this woman, who had already suffered so much, be made to explain and remember things that are best forgotten? What happened to her...well...it is more than you could grasp. This child is not yours. Nor is she ours. Not anymore. She belongs to them.

MARC: To whom? I thought she escaped the kidnappers.

SERGEANT: Not the kidnappers. The lions.

A beat.

MARC: The lions.

SERGEANT: Yes.

MARC: What does that mean? She "belongs" to them?

A pause. The two men stare at each other.

SERGEANT: Go home, Mr. American Writer. Go home.

He gets up to leave his desk and leave the office. The phones, which had gone quiet, immediately begin to ring incessantly again.

Lights fade.

SCENE 3:

Marc is seated on a bed. He is talking on a phone.

MARC: Hey. Hey yeah it's--no wait, it's me. *(beat)* Yeah, no. I don't know. Not yet. No, I haven't found---I've only been--yeah. I know. *(a beat)* I know. How is it? It's...I don't know. It's strange. It's strange to me. But I'm not sure it *actually* is, or if I just *think* it is. *(a beat)* It's like...I don't...things feel odd here. Like I should know them, know things, but I don't. Yeah, I know. I know that doesn't make sense to you. It's hard to explain. It's all so...no, not that, not *foreign*. I mean, yes it is that, but it's more than that. It feels. I don't know. Old. Yeah. Ancient, in some way. No, not the people. I mean, yes some of it is that. But the place. The air. It feels old. It tastes old. Like in a way that books feel. *(beat)* You know when you're deep in the library? In some forgotten corner of forgotten books that haven't been touched in years? Those sections of the library where no one ever goes. Because it's not new releases or popular favorites or computer stations or teen lit. Those small quiet hallways. With stacks and stacks of books and shelves. And you can smell the dust and the paper. Parts of the library that you're convinced that no librarians or custodians go. There's just the hum of overhead lights and the soft whirl of air from vents and that's it. Just you and the books. And here you are, surrounded by all these...these...I don't know. Things that were someone's life's work. Something he or she spent hours and weeks and months on. Writing and editing and cleaning and preparing. And now, after all that, here they sit. Untouched. Undisturbed. But the knowledge, what they know, what the books know, sits there. Waiting. With infinite patience. Waiting for someone to uncover it and use it and bring it to life. *(beat)* I liked those parts of the library. It was a little unnerving and thrilling at the same time. That's what it's like. That's what it feels like here. *(beat)*. ...you don't have a library card. *(beat)* Yeah ok. Never mind, yeah. *(beat)* No, not so far. Not a lot of help, no. Hot? I mean, Yeah, I guess so. Yeah it's hot. But it's---Jesus- I'm in a *city*. I'm not traipsing in the wilderness or something. Yes, of course. No it's... yeah. Yeah it's fine. I understand. *(beat)* Can I talk to...just for a minute is all I'm...*(beat)* You don't have to...Yeah. All right. Yeah no, it's fine. Sure. Let him know. Thanks. Yeah go to bed. I don't even know what time it is...wow, yeah, that's late. Ok, yeah. Yes. Good night.

He hangs up the phone. He sits on the bed, staring out. He hears a distant sound in the night. Something animal, something like a roar, but faint. He turns his head toward and listens. It doesn't return. He faces out again.

Lights fade.

SCENE 4

The next day. The sunshine is very bright. Marc is in a jeep whisking along a road. The Guide is with him, driving. Marc is still uncomfortable.

MARC: How long will it take?

GUIDE: What's that now?

MARC: This trip. How long will it take?

GUIDE: Oh! I don't know for sure. It can vary.

MARC: In what way?

GUIDE: What's that now?

MARC: In what way does it vary?

GUIDE: Oh! Many ways. The condition of the roads. The traffic. The weather.

MARC: So the conditions can change quite a bit.

GUIDE: They can, yes they can. Change, yes.

MARC: The roads can't be improved?

GUIDE: What's that now?

MARC: The roads? They can't be...?

GUIDE: Oh! The roads. Well you see, Ethiopia is a very poor country. One of the poorest in Africa. There are no funds to be spent on roads, really. That is a low priority. In the grand scheme of things. A low priority.

MARC: What's a high priority?

GUIDE: Staying alive.

A beat.

MARC: Isn't there a good amount of aid that comes in? Foreign aid?

GUIDE: There is some, there is some. But where it goes is something else.

MARC: What does that mean?

A beat.

GUIDE: Do you remember Live Aid?

MARC: What?

GUIDE: The concert. The big concert with the pop stars from the US and England. 1985.

MARC: Yeah sure. Yes.

GUIDE: It was for Ethiopia. For Africa. For relief.

MARC: For famine relief. Yeah I remember.

GUIDE: Did you watch it?

MARC: Did I watch the concert?

GUIDE: Yes. Did you watch and enjoy it?

MARC: I was a kid.

GUIDE: But did you watch it?

MARC: Yeah. I watched it with my parents. I think. Did you watch it?

GUIDE: Did I watch it?

MARC: Yes. Did you?

GUIDE: On no no.

MARC: Why not?

GUIDE: There wasn't food. Why would there be a television?

A beat. Marc doesn't know what to say.

GUIDE: So. Your parents. They probably donated some money to the cause.

MARC: I don't know. Yeah. Probably. Yes they probably did.

GUIDE: Did they ever ask what next?

MARC: Meaning what?

GUIDE: Meaning did they ask where that money went and what they could do next and what would happen to those funds?

MARC: I have no idea. I don't know.

GUIDE: So many say the same thing. "*I don't know.*"

MARC: They tried to do--

GUIDE: Yes they tried to do something. And that is commendable. And should be applauded. But it is not enough.

MARC: I don't know where you're--

GUIDE: This is a corrupt place. It was ruled with an iron hand for decades. Such money cannot just be expected to go where it needed to go. It needs to be more carefully monitored than that. Watched. All the good intention in the world is not enough. Water seeks its own level. Money stops for the smallest of dams.

A pause. They drive in silence for a moment.

MARC: So. You know about this woman?

GUIDE: Woman?

MARC: The woman. The girl saved by the lions.

GUIDE: Oh! Yes. The woman. I almost forgot that's what we are doing.

MARC: What does that mean?

GUIDE: Oh nothing. Nothing. Just makes sense, doesn't it.

MARC: What makes sense?

GUIDE: That someone from America would want to report on myths and ghost stories instead of the truth.

MARC: Wait a second-

GUIDE: Am I wrong?

MARC: You're not---it's not about being *wrong*...I just think that this story is--

GUIDE: --is something that that they tell children to make them feel safe.

MARC: So it's not real? It didn't happen, is that what you're saying?

GUIDE: I'm not saying anything either way. I just am making an observation.

MARC: If you don't believe that this story is real, then why are you helping me? Where are you taking me then?

GUIDE: Water seeks its own level, sir. Money stops for the--

MARC: --the smallest of dams. Right. Got it.

A pause. Marc is wracked with something suddenly. He is very uncomfortable and his head starts to swim. The Guide notices this.

GUIDE: What is the matter? Are you ill?

MARC: I don't---can we---could you stop the car for a moment?

GUIDE: Yes, certainly we can stop. We shouldn't though.

MARC: Why not?

GUIDE: This isn't the safest of--

MARC: *(about to be sick)* Stop the car. Please stop. Stop now.

The Guide stops the car and Marc tumbles out. He runs behind the car and is sick. The Guide looks on, impassively. As this is happening, there is a fairly rapid shift in light, descending from daylight to dusk in what seems like moments. Marc gathers himself and comes back to the front of the car, standing beside it.

MARC: The light.

GUIDE: What's that, sir?

MARC: The light, the sun is going down.

GUIDE: It is, yes.

MARC: But wasn't it--it was the afternoon. Wasn't it?

GUIDE: I don't know what you mean.

MARC: How long was I sick? Did I pass out?

GUIDE: I have no idea how long you've been sick. Quite a while, it seems to me.

MARC: What?

GUIDE: What?

A beat. Marc stares out at the sky, mesmerized.

MARC: The light. Does it always do this?

GUIDE: Oh away from the city, light does many strange things.

MARC: Does it?

GUIDE: Oh yes. Away from the light pollution. The lamps on the streets, the lamps in the cars, the lamps in the windows. They all make it seem like the sun is still hanging on. But it's an illusion. The sun drops much much more quickly then we remember. Out here? It drops so very quickly. It's for them.

MARC: For whom?

GUIDE: The lions.

A beat.

MARC: The lions.

GUIDE: Yes.

MARC: How so?

GUIDE: This is when they hunt. The lions. They rest all day. In the shade. Beneath trees. Resting. Waiting. You see, their vision is particular to this time of day. When the sun drops. Other animals, the transition from day to night, confuses their eyes. Confuses *our* eyes. But not theirs. This is when they look for prey. To hunt. Their eyes see better now. Did you know that?

MARC: I didn't.

GUIDE: Do you want to hear something remarkable?

MARC: Yes.

GUIDE: That ghost story of yours. The girl saved by the lions. Do you know when that was?

MARC: The date?

GUIDE: The time of day.

MARC: I don't, no.

GUIDE: They say it was the morning. That the lions saved her in the bright morning sunshine.

MARC: ...and you're saying...?

GUIDE: The lions can't even see then. The morning is not their time. That's how you know this story is false. A myth.

A beat.

MARC: There's nothing out here.

GUIDE: Excuse me?

MARC: You can't guide me anywhere.

GUIDE: Oh I can guide you many places. Just not where you want to go.

MARC: Right.

Marc clambers up into the jeep. The darkness is almost complete now.

MARC: Take me back to the city please.

GUIDE: *(smiling)* Oh that I can do, surely.

MARC: Thank you.

GUIDE: You don't have to thank me. You're paying me.

The car turns around and drives off into the darkness.

Lights fade.

SCENE 5:

Marc is in his hotel room. On the phone. As before.

MARC: Hey Mom. Yeah. Yeah it's me. Have you--No. I'm all right. Yeah it's...well, of course I don't *sound* all right. I'm seven thousand miles away. *(beat)* No Mom. I don't actually know if that's the distance. It's far. I'm far from home. Farthest from home I've ever been. *(A pause)*. Yes. I'm trying to sleep but it's--my body can't seem to adjust to the local time. Yeah. It feels like 2 in the afternoon when it's the middle of the night here. That's why I'm calling you now instead of in the middle of the day. *(beat)* The middle of *my* day. *(beat)* Yes, I'm eating. Trying to eat. Eating when I can. No Mom, it turns out they're aren't McDonald's everywhere. *(beat)* How are---are you ok? *(beat)* Yeah. I can imagine. The house isn't actually bigger, Mom. It just feels that way because...right. Yes. Because he's not there.*(beat)* It's funny though, you know. Well

he always said he was going to out live you just for spite. Just to piss you off. Haha. Yeah. Yeah it would've. *(beat)* Is Tommy---yes, sorry, *Thomas, Thomas*, is Thomas stopping by? He is? Good. Yeah good. No I haven't talked to him. I will email him. Yes Mom. He gets it on his phone. We get it on our phones. Yeah. *(beat. With some tension)* Yes, I talked to her. No, we didn't get that far. No. He wasn't. *(beat)* I don't know Mom. He wasn't home, he wasn't around. Yes. Of course. Yes I will tell him. *(beat)* You could always call yourself. You're his grandmo--yes. Right, yes I understand. *(a pause)* I'm going to go now Mom. I'm going to try to sleep. Yes. Yes Mother. Yes I will. I'm going to go now. Ok. Good night.

Marc puts the phone down. He sits quietly for a moment. He stands up, walks around the room, rubbing his face with his hands, trying to shake something off. He sits back down again. As he looks out the window, there is a strange and rapid shift in light. It passes over him, like the light of passing cars will do, but more dramatically, more urgently. Marc stares, not understanding anything.

Lights fade.

SCENE 6:

Marc is sitting in a sparsely-furnished room. The chair he is on is uncomfortable. Every few moments, he tries to adjust, to find a better position, but these efforts are fruitless. The air is thick and heavy and his head is pounding again. He finally stands up and paces around the room. Suddenly a man walks in. This is the Warlord. His presence is commanding and full.

WARLORD: Sit down.

MARC: --what?

WARLORD: Sit down. I don't want you standing. Standing makes me grind my teeth. You don't want that, do you?

MARC: I...no. No I don't.

A beat.

WARLORD: Then fucking sit.

Marc does.

WARLORD: And what do you think, eh?

MARC: What do I think about what?

WARLORD: About this place.

MARC: This place.

WARLORD: Yes.

A beat.

MARC: It's beautiful. I've never seen anything like it.

WARLORD: Beautiful?

MARC: Isn't it?

WARLORD: Ha, I don't know if I would call Ethiopia beautiful. It is dry, poor, uneducated, dusty and old.

MARC: I see.

WARLORD: But it is very strong. It is a very strong place.

MARC: What makes it strong?

WARLORD: When Europe decided to claim Africa in the 1800s, as if they were children clamoring for their favorite toys from the toy chest, Ethiopia was the only nation to resist these invaders.

MARC: Is that right?

WARLORD: It is indeed.

MARC: Impressive.

WARLORD: I am descended from those heroes.

MARC: Are you?

WARLORD: Oh yes. My mother would tell me stories of my grandfathers stopping the white men from taking our land from us.

MARC: That kind of history must be very...inspiring.

WARLORD: Yes. It is. You see, we are doing the best we can for our people. We are reminding them of their heritage and their strength.

MARC: Are you?

WARLORD: Oh yes. We are working to lift our people up!

Marc says nothing.

WARLORD: You disagree?

A long beat. Marc chooses his words carefully.

MARC: My only question would be who is being served in the end.

WARLORD: Meaning what?

MARC: I would wonder if it is the people being served or you. And your men.

A tense beat.

WARLORD: It is easy for you to come here and say such things, having no understanding of this place. Who we are or why things happen.

MARC: I don't intend offense. I'm trying to learn.

WARLORD: And how can you learn when you presume to already know?

A beat.

MARC: My apologies.

WARLORD: Our civil wars are over. Now is the time of peace.

Marc says nothing, but nods in tacit agreement. A pause.

WARLORD: So. Now. What.

MARC: I'm sorry?

WARLORD: What is it that you want? You want to interview me, yes?

MARC: uh...yes. I do, yes.

WARLORD: To learn about our glorious revolution.

MARC: In part, but mostly--

WARLORD: Generally I do not grant interviews. No.

MARC: No?

WARLORD: No.

A beat.

MARC: Then why--?

WARLORD: Why did I permit this? I will tell you. I looked you up.

MARC: Looked me up.

WARLORD: Yes. Your work. Your articles. The things you've written.

MARC: You have.

WARLORD: I have.

A beat.

MARC: And?

A beat.

WARLORD: I was unimpressed.

MARC: Ah. I see.

WARLORD: You're not much a writer, are you?

MARC: I don't know. I get by.

WARLORD: *(laughing)* Yes, haha, you get *by*. Not saying much there, is it? No prizes received, no awards won, no groundbreaking work. Not much of substance.

MARC: I don't think that's--

WARLORD: What is the term?

MARC: What?

WARLORD: Puff. Puff pieces. Is that not what they're called?

A beat.

MARC: I suppose so.

WARLORD: Stories of cats caught in trees and little boy scouts raising money for an old man's operations. Things of this sort.

MARC: Yes.

A beat. The Warlord looks Marc over.

WARLORD: So, I had to ask myself: what does a writer of *this* kind want to talk to me about? What subject could be on his mind?

MARC: There are a few different subjects.

WARLORD: Such as?

MARC: I'm sorry?

WARLORD: Such as what? What subjects?

MARC: Children. I wanted to talk about the use of children in wartime.

WARLORD: The use of--?

MARC: Of children, yes.

A pause.

WARLORD: What makes you think we use children?

MARC: There are various reports--

WARLORD: These are unsubstantiated.

MARC: Multiple sources-

WARLORD: Lies.

MARC: What about the eye-witness accounts--

WARLORD: Liars.

MARC: Right.

A beat.

MARC: I'd like to ask you about something else.

WARLORD: About children?

MARC: Yes. In a way.

WARLORD: And what would that be?

MARC: I'd like to ask about something that happened 10 years ago.

WARLORD: And what is that?

MARC: There was an...incident...where a child, a girl, was kidnapped.

A beat.

WARLORD: Many girls are kidnapped. Many children go missing.

MARC: But something strange happened with this girl.

WARLORD: Something strange. And that was...?

MARC: There were lions.

WARLORD: Lions.

MARC: Yes. Does that ring a bell for you?

WARLORD: There are lions all over Africa.

MARC: These lions rescued this girl from her kidnappers. Kidnappers that were planning on selling her into a forced marriage. Slavery, basically. Kidnappers, I am told, who worked for you.

A pause. The Warlord staring into Marc, who doesn't back down, but struggles to maintain himself.

MARC: Do you recall what I am talking about, sir?

WARLORD: Are you accusing me of being a slaver?

MARC: I'm only reporting what I am told.

WARLORD: It takes an interesting kind of bravery for an American to accuse an African of slavery.

MARC: I'm not accusing you of anything. I am only trying to find out the truth of something. A story I heard.

A beat.

WARLORD: There are many stories about this place. Many stories about lions.

A beat.

WARLORD: Shall I tell you one?

A beat.

MARC: All right.

A beat.

WARLORD: A long time ago, there was a yellow moon. Something rare, you understand. When it rises over the savannah, huge and round, the sun itself may as well be out. There is a bright, golden light, with the hint of silver, shining over everything. A Hunter knew that this would be the time to look for food for his people. Armed with his spear and his blade, he trekked into the bush, watchful for anything that he could kill and that could kill him. As he passed softly under a large acacia tree, he heard something and looked up. And there, in the branches, were two glowing eyes. The Hunter heard a quiet rumbling and knew what was looking at him. It was Lion. Lord of those plains. Lion leapt gracefully to the ground, without making a sound. He shook his mane and idly cleaned his large paws, never taking his eyes off the Hunter.

"What brings you out here at this time of night," Lion asked, sounding casual. The Hunter, knowing that if he showed *any* fear, Lion would devour him, stood straighter and answered in a firm voice:

"I am hunting, my Lord. Looking to bring home food for my family."

"Is that so, " Lion said. "A pity. For it is more likely that you will be my dinner this night."

"My Lord, " said the Hunter, thinking quickly, "may I suggest something else?"

"And what would that be?" said Lion.

The Hunter gathered his wits and his bravery and said:

"With these, my weapons, the spear and the knife, which are as sharp as your mighty teeth and powerful claws, we would be able to kill twice as many gazelles as we would alone. Why not hunt together and bring home twice as much food for us both? More than even you could eat in one night, my Lord. More than you could eat in a week. Then you could rest, as befits your station, knowing that your meals are waiting. And I would leave you, in peace and grateful for your mercy, taking some food home for my people."

Lion thought on this. And said:

"These toys of yours may be sharp, but they do not have my speed. Nor my strength. This must be clear."

"Indeed you are correct, my Lord' said the Hunter. "My apologies for suggesting that they were your equal."

The Hunter kneeled before Lion, saying "I ask your forgiveness, Lord Lion."

Lion rose up to his full height and said "I forgive this insult. But your punishment will be to help me hunt and gather as much meat as we can. And you will have none of it. But I will allow you to keep your life."

The Hunter bowed, saying "You are as wise as you are merciful, my Lord. Many thanks."

With that, the pair went off into the night, hunting together under the yellow moon. After several hours, they had more than a dozen gazelles between them, enough food to feed the Hunter's village for weeks and weeks.

Lion turned to the Hunter and said "You kill well, for a man. But sadly you will never be as strong or as fast as me. Leave now, and keep your life."

The Hunter bowed again. "As you wish my Lord. My thanks for your pity on me."

With that, Lion turned back to the kills and started to gorge himself. The Hunter took a few steps away and behind Lion, waiting for him to be fully engaged with his meal. When he was certain Lion wouldn't notice, he silently ran up behind him and leapt on Lion's back. Lion roared with rage and surprise, a roar heard miles away. Children woke crying when they heard it. Elephants huddled their young close when they heard it.

"What is this madness?" Lion bellowed.

The Hunter, clinging to Lion's mane, whispered in his ear:

"You are right, my Lord. I will never be as fast as you. Or as strong."

He placed his knife against Lion's neck.

"But I will always be smarter." And he cut Lion's throat. He held him until he had passed and in the morning, dug a grave as best he could to serve such a lord. With a final bow, the Hunter left and carried the gazelle home to his people.

There is a long beat, wherein Marc and the Warlord are looking at each other, into each other. After a time, the Warlord pulls out a handgun and points it at Marc.

WARLORD: This is my knife. Sharp as a lion. And I will always be smarter.

The Warlord stands up, still pointing the gun at Marc and walks over to him slowly. He deliberately places the barrel of the gun against Marc's forehead. A beat is held here.

WARLORD: What do you say now, reporter? Is this like your puff pieces? How does this feel?

A pause.

MARC: It feels good.

A beat.

WARLORD: What?

MARC: It feels good. The pressure. It feels good.

WARLORD: It feels...good.

MARC: In my time here, since I've been here, I have had terrible headaches. Do you get headaches, sir?

The Warlord is at a loss.

MARC: I don't know what it is about this place, about *this country*, but I have had the most intense headaches. Is it the altitude or the time zone or the air? I don't know. I've taken pills and showers and stretched and all of those things. But *pressure*...pressure is the only thing that seems to help. Putting my hands on my head and *squeezing*. It's the only thing that feels better. So, this, what you're doing now, this pressure...it feels good to me.

A pause.

MARC: So by all means--don't stop.

Marc stares at the Warlord, who is rattled for the first time. After a moment, he pulls the gun away.

WARLORD: Leave now.

Marc stands up to go.

MARC: One last question.

A beat.

WARLORD: What is it.

MARC: The story you told me. That myth. Where did you hear it?

A beat.

WARLORD: My grandfather told it to me. His grandfather told it to him.

A beat.

WARLORD: Why do you ask?

MARC: I was wondering how it ends.

WARLORD: I told you how it ends.

MARC: No. You didn't. What happens after the Hunter goes home?

A beat. The Warlord says nothing.

MARC: I wonder if Lion's children ever came looking for him.

A beat. The two men look at each.

MARC: Thank you for your time.

He leaves. The Warlord looks at the gun in his hand. Looks where Marc exited.

Lights fade.

SCENE 7:

Marc sits in his room. It is again very late. He rubs his fingers absently against his forehead, the spot where the Warlord placed the gun. Suddenly, without warning, there is a knock on the door. Marc nearly jumps out of his skin.

MARC: Yes?

There is no reply. Marc waits a moment.

MARC: Yes? Is there--can I help--?

There is no reply.

Marc stares at the door. There is the shadow of someone's feet under the doorframe. It doesn't move. Silently, an envelope is slid underneath, into Marc's room. The feet outside quickly move away.

Marc looks at the envelope and, with some hesitation, walks over to it. He picks it up and looks it over. There is no writing on it of any kind. He looks at the door. Makes a decision. Opens it. Light floods into the room. Ugly, fluorescent, hallway light. It hurts his eyes and his head. Covering his eyes, Marc looks out into the hallway. There is no one there.

MARC: Hello?

There is no reply.

Marc looks up and down the hallway for a moment. Then steps back into his room and shuts the door. The room is immediately plunged back into a semi-darkness. Marc breathes a sigh of relief at this.

He walks back over towards the window. Ambient light is streaming in. He slowly opens the envelope. There is a single piece of paper inside, folded. Marc carefully unfolds it and reads. It doesn't take long. He looks up, looks out the window, then back at the paper. Reads it again. He lets the envelope fall to the floor and lets his arms drop to his sides. He looks out the window for a long time.

Lights fade.

SCENE 8:

Outside. Daylight. It is early morning. He is dressed and prepped for traveling. Marc is talking on his phone.

MARC: Mel- hey. Hey yeah it's me. It's Marc. Can you--you can. Ok yeah. No I think I'm finding some things. I'm heading out to the village today. Yeah. Where the girl is from. No. No apparently she's not. The father is there. Her father. The girl's father. What? How do I--I received it. Yeah. No. Someone...someone slipped the location and the information that he was still there under my door. *(Beat)* Yeah I know how it sounds. *(Beat)* Yes I know this isn't *All the President's Men*. *(Beat)* I don't know. No. I don't know. *(Beat)* Because what choice do I have? No. No. No. Stop it Mel. Because! Because I have to. I have to trust *something*. Look, listen, ok, listen to me for minute. Ok? We don't know anything. Who? You, me, any of us! No, we don't. This is...no wait, you're not *here*. *(Beat)* Yes I know why I'm here and how I'm here. I know it's because of you. Because of the magazine. But listen to me, this place---it's not what I thought it was. It's not what you thought it was. It's...I don't know Mel. It's a strange place. A complicated place. And I have no reason to not believe the information is real. No one here has lied to me. They don't *want* me here, but they haven't lied. *(Beat)* How am I feeling? I'm---I'm fine. I'm--No Mel. No. I'm closer now. Closer to understanding something. *(A pause)* No. No. I'm going to do this. And I will bring you a story. An incredible story. *(Beat)* Yes. Yes. I understand. Talk to you soon.

He hangs up the phone. A beat. He gathers his things and heads off.

Lights fade.

SCENE 9:

A dusty dry place. Late afternoon sunlight. It is strong and hot. There is a weak-looking tree providing a small sliver of shade. There is a beaten-up lawn chair under the tree in the shade. The Father is sitting there. Staring into space, idly shuffling his feet on the ground under the chair, scuffing up small clouds of dust. He has been waiting. After a time, Marc steps into the scene. The Father looks up, sees Marc and stands. He reaches out a hand. Marc walks over and takes it.

MARC: Hello. I'm looking for--

FATHER: Me.

MARC: You're the--

FATHER: Father to the Lion Child. Yes. I am.

MARC: The Lion Child.

FATHER: Yes.

MARC: Is that what you called her?

FATHER: That's what she is.

A beat.

MARC: Are you--

FATHER: Am I what?

MARC: What I mean is, did you send that information? The information on how to find you?

A beat.

FATHER: No. I didn't.

MARC: I'm sorry, I'm lost.

FATHER: Indeed.

MARC: What I mean is, you seem as though you were expecting me.

FATHER: Word travels.

MARC: I suppose it does.

A pause.

FATHER: So...what is it that you want to know?

MARC: I'm--well--I'm wondering what happened to your daughter. If you could tell that story. What happened to her then and what has happened to her since.

A silence.

MARC: I'm sorry, I know this must be hard. To talk about this. If you're uncomfortable--

FATHER (interrupting): Why do you want to know these things?

MARC: It's a fascinating story, frankly. People will want to hear about--

FATHER: No, sir.

MARC: I'm sorry?

FATHER: *You*. Why do *you* want to know these things?

MARC: (*hesitating*) Well, as I've said, it's an incredible--

FATHER: No. *YOU*.

A pause.

FATHER: What have you lost?

A pause.

MARC: I--

FATHER: You have children.

MARC: I have a son, yes.

FATHER: And who else?

MARC: Just---I have just a son--

FATHER: --but you *had* a daughter, yes?

A long pause.

MARC: Yes.

A beat.

FATHER: And she is gone.

A beat.

MARC: Yes.

FATHER: And how did this happen?

A beat.

MARC: I don't know.

FATHER: She is passed?

A beat.

MARC: I--I don't know. I don't know. She--she's missing. That what I know. *(Beat)* She didn't come home one day. And I, we, haven't seen her since. There had been...there had been trouble. Her grandfather died. My wife and I got divorced. There was arguing and raised voices. She would come home later and later. Her mother would tell me this. I wasn't there. I wasn't there because of the divorce. I saw her and her brother on weekends. And I wasn't there. One day, she didn't come home. At all. And hasn't been heard from since. We looked and called the police and made searches and contacted her friends and boyfriends and teachers and anyone we could think of. But there wasn't a trace. There was nothing. *(Beat)* She's gone.

A pause. Marc hasn't spoken like this to anyone.

FATHER: And you wish had been there. Been there to protect her. From whatever it was that took her.

MARC: Yes.

A pause.

FATHER: Like the lions.

MARC: Yes.

A beat.

FATHER: Your daughter is not here.

MARC: Yes I know.

FATHER: Looking for mine will not help you find yours.

MARC: I know.

A beat.

MARC: I just wanted to--to talk to her. I thought maybe--

FATHER: (interrupting) It sounds like your daughter made a choice.

MARC: You don't know that. She could have been kidnapped. She could have been raped. She could have been murdered.

FATHER: Or she may have simply left.

A pause.

FATHER: Perhaps she had had enough disappointment.

Marc stares in rage at the Father. Something that has been building inside him snaps. He rushes him and throws him to the ground.

MARC: How *dare* you talk to me that way? You think--what? What do you think? You think you can talk to me like that? She--

Marc is suddenly gripped by severe pain in his head. He collapses, hands to his temples. The Father collects himself, sits up and watches impassively. After a moment or two, the pain subsides.

FATHER: Are you well?

MARC: (*breathing heavily*) I don't--no. No, I'm not. Something is wrong with me. Something in my head. It hurts so much.

FATHER: That must be hard.

A beat. Marc looks at the Father incredulously.

MARC: Yes. It is.

A pause. Marc massaging his head as best he can. The Father stands up and moves over to the small, pathetic shade of the tree. He stands there a moment.

FATHER: Perhaps you should join me here. Perhaps not be in the sun.

Marc looks at him, then gathers himself and walks over to the tree. The two men are an odd pair, huddled together under this sad little tree, trying to hide from the sun.

FATHER: Do you know why my daughter is not here?

Marc says nothing.

FATHER: It is because she was disappointed in her father.

Marc says nothing.

FATHER: It is a hard thing to have nothing. It is a hard thing to not be able to protect your family. Your wife. Your children. To know that you cannot give them anything.

A pause.

FATHER: You are a reporter.

MARC: Yes.

FATHER: You did your research before coming here.

MARC: Yes. I did some. Yes.

FATHER: Marriage by abduction. You know this?

MARC: I know something about it, yes.

A pause.

FATHER: These men--they come into your home. Sometimes at night. Sometimes during the day. And they take your daughter. And you cannot stop them. Do you know why?

A beat.

MARC: Why?

A beat.

FATHER: Because this is a poor place. Because when they come to take your daughter, they rape her, they make her unable to come back. Do you see? You *cannot* take her back then. It is not done. That is what people believe here. And then, they pay you something. A goat. Some grain. Some money. And you take it. You *have* to take it. Because here, we have nothing. In the cities, there is nothing. In the villages, there is nothing. So you take what they give you. What these men give you. For stealing your daughter. For raping her. For making her unfit for your village. For your family. For your eyes. Because this is a poor place. The village elders, they make this decision for you. They handle these negotiations. They make sure a...a *fair* price is reached. A fair price for your child.

While Marc listens to this, he slowly slinks down the tree, until he is sitting down. But collapsed would be a more accurate word.

FATHER: And you *need* these things, the things that they offer. The goat. The grain. The money. You need them so that the rest of your family can live.

A pause.

MARC: And these girls, what happens to these girls?

A beat.

FATHER: *(with a resigned casualness)* Oh. Well. Many things really. They are used. They are beaten. They become the playthings of these men. They contract HIV. They become mothers themselves. Become mothers when they are still children.

A beat.

FATHER: They die.

A pause.

MARC: Don't you- doesn't anyone--the police?

FATHER: Oh. No. Not really. This is *common*, you understand. The taking of the girls. This is a very common thing. These abductions...it has been going on for so long. No one can remember how it started. When it started. Just that this is what it is. *(Beat)* Sometimes they escape. Sometimes the girls escape from these men. They run and hide. They hide with family or friends. And sometimes they are safe. But these men---they come for them, you see? They have laid claim and they want their property back. And so they come. They explain that they have already...they have already *had* the girls. So they cannot come home. Not now. And they speak to the elders. And the elders negotiate the price. And that is that.

Marc stands up slowly, holding on to the tree for support. He steps out into the strong sun.

FATHER: You shouldn't stand in that light. It will hurt your head.

MARC: *(ignoring this)* Your daughter. This is what happened to her?

A pause.

FATHER: They came for her during the day. The morning. They had seen her coming from school. They tracked her. Like dogs, they tracked her. And they waited until I and her mother were gone. And they came in and grabbed her. But we came home. Her mother and I. We walked in as they were taking her from us. I stood there. Watching them. My wife was crying and begging. They had guns and pointed them at us. And I stood there. And did nothing. My daughter was screaming at me to help her. Pleading. The men said they would bring back money and food. That they would properly compensate us when the time was right. That if we did anything, they would kill us. They would kill her. That she would be safe. That they loved her and wanted to protect her. That I should not do something I would regret. And I stood there. And did nothing. My wife was clawing at them to let our daughter go. My daughter was begging me to help her, to not let her be taken this way. To not let this be her life. And the men pointed their guns and promised payment and they took her. They took her away from me.

Marc says nothing. He looks to the Father, and then looks out. The sunlight has gotten brighter and it's hurting him, but he's ignoring it. The Father stands under the tree, it's shadow lengthening and deepening. It's becoming harder to distinguish where the tree ends and the Father begins.

FATHER: After she was saved, after the lions saved her, the authorities brought her back home to us. They drove up in a cloud of dust and light and they told what had happened. "*We cannot explain it,*" they said. "*Most likely the lions were going eat her. Most likely they mistook her crying for that of a cub. They weren't 'saving' her. It's a strange story but a coincidence,*" they said. My wife fell to her knees and hugged our daughter with the strength that only a mother can have. I was still standing. In the same place where I had been when they had taken her. All while her mother held her and wept, my daughter--she stared at me. She stared at me with eyes that had become golden. They were strong and they were bright and they looked like the eyes of a lion. I said nothing. I wanted to look away, my shame screaming at me to look away, but her eyes kept me. She slipped from her mother's arms and walked to me. We stood there, facing each other, for so long of a time. I finally opened my mouth to speak, to beg her forgiveness and she slapped me across the face, hard, her nails scratching me, making me bleed. She looked at me and I nodded to her. And she turned around, gathered a pack, kissed her mother and she walked off.

A beat.

MARC: Where did she go?

A beat.

FATHER: You know where she went.

A beat.

MARC: To the lions.

FATHER: Yes. To the lions.

MARC: You didn't follow her?

FATHER (*shaking his head*): She did not want me to. And I cannot blame her for this. *They* protected her. *They* saved her from a life of rape. A life of slavery and torment. *They* did what her father could not. What he *would* not do. The lions. They are her family. They are her people. (*Nodding*) It is well. I am grateful to them. They have earned the right to her love. And her respect. Which is more than her father can say.

MARC: She's never come back?

FATHER: (*shrugging*) I cannot say. In the years that followed, I would wake in the middle of the night and hear my wife whispering in the dark by the doorway or the window. I would lie still, eyes closed, pretending to sleep, straining my ears to hear if it was my daughter's voice. And in the morning, I would ask my wife. And she would tell me that I was imagining. That it was a dream or she was sleepwalking or something like this.

A beat.

FATHER: Sometimes I will walk. At dusk. Out into the brush. For miles I will walk. Hoping that perhaps the lions will come for me. And take me to her. But they do not. I have thought, in the distance, that shimmers with heat, that I see her. Far off. With three lions at her side. But then they are gone. And I am not sure if I saw them at all.

A pause. Marc is taking all of this in.

MARC: Where would I go?

FATHER: Go?

MARC: If I wanted to find her, where would I go? Do you have any idea?

The Father sighs heavily and considers. He walks out from under the tree and heads downstage left. He stands looking out for a moment, then turns to look at Marc and points his left arm straight out.

MARC: Thank you.

FATHER: They will not allow you to approach her. The lions.

MARC: I'm not armed. I don't want anything but to talk to her.

FATHER: They will not allow it. The best you may do is a glimpse from a distance which may not even be there.

A beat.

MARC: Maybe they will know.

FATHER: Know what?

MARC: That I've lost a child too.

A long pause.

FATHER: It is too long of a walk for today. You may stay here tonight. Start off early.

MARC: How far is it? Do you know?

FATHER: *(shaking his head)*. It is farther than I have ever gone.

Marc nods. The brightness of the light is subsiding and he is feeling some kind of relief. The odd descent into twilight is happening again.

MARC: It's cooling off. It feels cooler.

FATHER. Yes. It is.

There is a silence. Marc starts to breathe more easily. The comfort of being out of the sun after having been in it all day, to a brutal effect. The two men look out, towards the Woman and the Lions.

FATHER: Talking to her will not bring your child back to you.

MARC: I know.

A beat.

FATHER: If you find her, tell her that her father misses her. And hopes that she is happy.

MARC: I will. Thank you.

They sit for a moment. The light is rapidly dimming. There is a distant rumble. Perhaps it's thunder. Perhaps it is a roar again.

FATHER: They know.

MARC: What?

FATHER: They know you are coming.

Marc looks over to the Father, but he has vanished in the shadow of the tree. It has consumed him and only the faintest of lights hovers over Marc. It is the light when a sudden and black thunderstorm emerges from nowhere on a summer's day. After a moment, it too is gone.

Lights out.

SCENE 10

Marc is again speaking into his phone. There is a faint light, almost a violet, as night and day bleed into each other.

MARC: Hi. Hi. It's me. I don't know if...(pause) I have no idea if you are getting these messages. I have no idea if this voicemail is even attached to a phone anymore. I keep calling because...because I hope maybe someday you'll answer it. (Beat) I'm sure you won't. I'm certain that you won't. I just hope. I call and listen to your voice saying leave your name and number and I will get back to you. I play a game with myself. I see how long I pretend you are actually speaking and that it's not a recording. It's a game I never win. Ha, you can imagine. You always beat me in games. That's the killer, you know? I wouldn't have to "let" you win. You always just beat me, legitimately. Cards, board games, whatever it was. You would win. It drove me crazy but made me proud at the same time. (Pause) You'll never believe where I am. I'm in Africa. In Ethiopia, in fact. I've been tracking a story. A story you would have loved, but would have been utterly unsurprised by. You always believed in the decency of natural things. I hope I can get to the end of it. So I can tell you about it. I know that I'm going to want to tell you about it. Your mother has told me to stop. To stop calling your number. But--(Beat) You know, listen to this. I read an article about the Internet and radio waves and digital life and all these things. And it said that we, as humans, cannot comprehend the vastness of what it is. That we have created a universe whose size is so much greater than we understand. That much like the physical universe, the---the---the *actual* universe, which is expanding, which *continues* to expand, ever since the Big Bang, our---our *cyberverse* is doing the same thing. Expanding. Hurling past us and away from us and encompassing more and stretching father apart at the same time. That it will continue to do so. That it passes out into the vastness of real space. That--that, I don't know, that aliens on Planet X are watching reruns of *Star Trek* and think that's our space program. That they are watching all the weird little cat videos that made you laugh so hard. And when you go out that far, that far out into space, where time and light bend and warp... who's to say, you know? Who's to say what's in it and where it goes and what it does? I've been thinking that it may snap back on itself. And collide in some way, with the real, whatever that means, with the real universe. So these messages I'm leaving...it could be that you are still hearing them. That

regardless of...of wherever you are...that they are still reaching you. So. I'm going to keep leaving them. I'm going to keep sending them out to you. I know you'd roll your eyes at that. And I can't say as I'd blame you for it. I mean, I am managing to both be new-agey *and* a tech geek in one fell swoop. That's no small feat. You've gotta be a little impressed. It's not easy to pull that off. Hah. *(Pause)*. Someone said that there is hope in all things. So I'm going to keep leaving these messages. As long as I can. *(Beat)* I hope you're safe. I hope you're sleeping. It's so very late now. *(Beat)* Good night.

Marc hangs up. He sits with his phone in his hand. Above him the stars twinkle and dance slowly, more and more of them appearing. The enormity of the night sky becomes apparent to him, the band of the Milky Way and so much silver light that it illuminates the entire stage. Marc looks up at the light, marveling at the stars. He closes his eyes, lets it wash over him.

Lights fade slowly.

SCENE 11:

Lights rise slowly. It is the light of very early dawn. It is still mostly night. Deep blues and pale oranges. Marc is lying center stage on the ground. He is in a semi-fetal position, having fallen asleep this way. The tree is gone. The chair is gone. The Father is gone. He is now somewhere else. He starts to shake in his sleep. Whether it is from the cold or a dream we cannot tell. He begins to mutter, inaudible at first and then unintelligible. It never rises to the sound level of screams, shouts or cries. They are muffled, but desperate sounds.

As Marc lies in the throes of what he is experiencing, the three Lions appear on the horizon. They come in closer, drawn by the sounds. They creep in silently, from different directions, but moving as one unit. The shadows do allow us to fully see them. They move gracefully, with strength and purpose as they approach Marc, who is still sleeping. As they surround him, moving in a slow circle, the Woman appears upstage. She is watching impassively. The Lions stop moving simultaneously. Marc wakes, holding his head as he sits up, eyes closed, still unaware of the Lions, or the Woman. As he slowly gathers himself, he becomes aware of their presence, the feeling of them around him. He gets to his feet as the Lions press in around him. Marc does not move. He does not speak. The Woman walks downstage to him. She stands apart and they look at each other, the Lions pulling away from Marc and towards the Woman.

A pause.

MARC: I don't remember walking here.

The Woman says nothing.

MARC: I don't remember falling asleep.

WOMAN: Perhaps you are sleeping now.

A beat.

MARC: Maybe I am.

A beat.

MARC: Can you tell me how I got here?

WOMAN: How could I tell you that?

Marc takes a moment and looks around him, scanning the distance. Nothing looks familiar.

MARC: Which direction did I come from?

WOMAN: *(shrugging)* Any of them. All of them.

A beat.

MARC: I was at your father's house.

WOMAN: Is that so?

MARC: Yes. He misses you.

A pause. The Woman stares into Marc for a moment and then looks away.

WOMAN: This is not my father's house.

A beat.

MARC: What time is it?

WOMAN: Now.

The Woman looks at Marc until he looks away, The Lions move, pawing around, moving independently. One always stays near the Woman. In other words, as two move, one stays. Then one returns to the Woman, allowing the other to move around. There is always one on guard.

MARC: Have they been with you all this time?

WOMAN: They have.

MARC: I didn't realize lions could live so long.

WOMAN: Anything can live that long. Left to itself. A lion. A tree.

MARC: A child.

It is the Woman's turn to look away. The Lion at her side nuzzles her briefly then moves away. Another replaces it in their pattern.

Marc watches the Lions for a time, seeing their rhythm.

MARC: You're never left alone.

WOMAN: Never.

A beat.

MARC: Why?

WOMAN: Why what?

MARC: Why you? There are hundreds of girls who are stolen. Raped. Murdered. Enslaved. Why did they choose you?

A beat. The Woman looks at Marc.

WOMAN: Ask them.

Marc takes a small step toward her. The other two lions immediately run back and knock Marc to the ground. They stand over him. Marc holds his hands up, palms open.

MARC: I'm not going to hurt you.

WOMAN: That's what they said.

MARC: Who?

WOMAN: The other men. The men who took me the first time. "*We aren't going to hurt you*" they said, as they pulled me down, pulled my clothes down. "*We aren't going to hurt you.*" That is a fairy story men tell. To fool little girls before they destroy them.

MARC: I'm not like those men.

WOMAN: Why should I believe that? Why should I believe you?

A pause.

MARC: You shouldn't.

A beat. The Woman looks to the Lions and they back slowly away, lows growls rumbling in their bellies. Marc stands up.

WOMAN: You are the first man I have spoken to. In ten years.

MARC: I thank you for it.

The Woman nods curtly and walks towards the Lions. They swirl around her.

MARC: How have you lived out here? How have you managed it?

A beat. The Woman looks at Marc.

WOMAN: They take care of me. They show me what to do, how to live. To find the balance in things.

MARC: What about food? Shelter?

WOMAN: I have them. Maybe not as you need them, but I have them.

MARC: Isn't it hard?

A beat.

WOMAN: *(knowingly)* Harder than what?

MARC: I don't know.

A beat.

WOMAN: I think about my ancestors. Or *your* ancestors. They were so much stronger. These are weak times. People are weak. A weak species. Without their cars and their phones and their expensive shoes or their ready-made meals that require no effort, they can do nothing. They freeze. They stop. They surrender. Weakness. Made all the worse in its pathetic-ness. They crumble and fall and that's that. That is the end of it. And why? There is no reason for it. *(Beat)* You have heard stories, yes? Stories of children lost in the wild. Children who have become feral. They survive. They make it. *Children.* As I was a *child.* *(Beat)* We are stronger than we think. Stronger than we allow ourselves to be. We could be so much more. And we fail.

A beat. The Lions stop suddenly. As if they have heard or smelled something. There is a flash of something. Lightning perhaps. And the a roll of thunder. The Lions crouch low to the ground and growl deeply, rumbling with the thunder.

MARC: A storm?

WOMAN: Just the heat. It makes the air crack and snap back at itself.

MARC: I don't--I don't feel any heat. It's cold.

WOMAN: Is it.

Marc watches as the Woman soothes the Lions, whispering softly into their ears, each in turn.

MARC: Do you miss the sound of voices? Talking to other people?

WOMAN: They talk to me. Every night before we sleep, they gather around me and tell me stories. With beautiful voices.

A beat.

MARC: What kind of stories?

WOMAN: Of the times before men. Before hunters and guns and trucks. Of kings and their princes. Of gods and their glories. And their mistakes. Enough stories to last a lifetime. And more.

MARC: How do they tell you these things?

WOMAN: (*shrugging*) They just do.

MARC: And you understand them?

WOMAN: Anyone could. We choose not listen.

MARC: And you haven't been afraid?

WOMAN: Of what?

MARC: Of--of--of being attacked, being hurt, being lost, being starved, being thirsty, being *eaten*, being trapped!

WOMAN: How could I ever be more trapped than I was in my father's house?

A beat.

MARC: I don't know.

WOMAN: Where I am from, girls are treated as less than cattle. Something for men to beat and shove their pricks into. And after we are beaten and raped, we are traded for the price of a goat. For a sheaf of wheat. So that our humiliation is complete. To know your family places more value on *grain* than on your *life*. That is being trapped. I am more safe here than anywhere else in this world. And I would rather die, here, under the sky and on this plain, than under the sweaty weight of an ugly man.

MARC: (*nodding*) Of course.

WOMAN: Woman, *girls*, are used this world over. This is nothing new. It has always been this way. Better for us all to live our days in the wild. Away from it. From them.

A beat.

MARC: Are there---are there more?

A beat.

WOMAN: More what?

MARC: More women. Women like you.

A beat.

WOMAN: Hundreds.

MARC: Hundreds?

WOMAN: More, perhaps.

MARC: Here?

WOMAN: Where?

MARC: Here. In the wild.

A beat.

WOMAN: I have seen them. In the distance. With a wave we salute each other. But never closer than that.

MARC: Why not closer?

A beat.

WOMAN: To keep each other safe. If we do not know where the other is, we cannot give her away. That trust is everything. That safety is everything.

A pause. Marc wanders away from the Woman and looks out into the distance. The Lions are roused at his movement. They prowl towards Marc, but not to threaten, simply to investigate.

MARC: *(still looking out)* Are there woman in the wild everywhere? All over the world?

WOMAN: There are men threatening women all over the world. So yes.

A pause.

MARC: Are they all as safe as you?

WOMAN: I don't know. They are strong. Women *are* the natural order. They give and create and transform and birth. They belong in the world. The actual world, not cityscapes and concrete roads.

A beat.

MARC: They don't all have lions.

WOMAN: No. But they have their wits. And their hearts. And that is enough.

Marc reaches out to touch a Lion, but it pulls away, as do the other two.

MARC: *(quietly)* Are you happy?

A long pause. The Woman clicks her tongue and the Lions come to her. She kneels among them, the Lions rubbing their faces against her. She stands up after a moment, a Lion on either side of her, and one immediately in front of her.

WOMAN: I am alive. And I am of myself. And I have them. And that is enough.

She turns to walk away, the Lions all looking at Marc, almost as if standing at attention, between him and the Woman.

WOMAN: Do not come here again. They will not suffer it.

She begins leaving. The Lions turn to follow. Marc hesitates.

MARC: Can I ask you one last thing?

The Woman stops, but does not turn back. The Lions look from her to Marc. A low rumble of growls begins again.

MARC: Please? One last thing. Please.

A beat.

WOMAN: What?

MARC: When you--when you...*see*...the others, the other women...how far can you see?

A beat. The Woman turns to look at Marc. Her eyes are golden.

WOMAN: Very far indeed.

A beat.

MARC: Have you...have you seen a young woman? With red hair? She'd only be a few years younger than you. Have you seen--?

A long pause. The Woman looks at Marc, then to the Lions, whose eyes are glittering. They (the Woman & the Lions) communicate somehow. She looks out for a time. Then back to Marc.

WOMAN: I cannot tell you where she is.

MARC: ...is she...is she safe?

WOMAN: *(with a kindness she has not shown before)* She is safe.

Marc falls to his knees, with grief and exhaustion. He sobs. There is another roll of thunder in the distance, but fainter. The Lions heads snap towards it again. The light is lowering as a storm is coming. The eyes of the Woman and the Lions sparkle gold in the dim.

WOMAN: Do not come back.

MARC: *(looking up and nodding)* I won't.

The Woman and the Lions turn to leave. Just before they disappear, the foursome stops. The Woman does not turn around.

WOMAN: One day, when you are home, walk. At dusk. Walk far off to the horizon. In whatever wild you have. Walk father than you think. And before the sun drops, in the greater distance, you may see a glimpse. That shimmers in the distance.

MARC: *(breaking down)* Thank you.

A beat. The foursome begins their journey again.

MARC: Can I tell your father anything?

WOMAN: *(without turning around)* He already knows.

They are gone. Marc sits on the ground. For a long while. The day brightens, gently. The thunder and storms are gone. Marc gathers himself, stands up and walks off.

Lights fade.

SCENE 12

It is a clean morning. Cool comfortable air and an easy sun. Marc is seated on a bench, his things beside him. He is on his phone.

MARC: Hey, yeah, it's me. Yeah, I'm making my way home. Well it's...no, yeah, it's going to be a while. No, I'm not flying. Yeah, I've booked a train, I'm waiting for a train. Yeah. Now, in fact. It's taking me to the port and then I'm catching a ship. *(Beat)* I know it's longer. It's ok. I wanted the trip. Crossing the ocean by ship is something we all should do. To remind ourselves how big it all is. *(Beat)* The world. *(Beat)* I'm looking forward to it. Looking forward to breathing that air. It'll be good. And be a good cap to the story. What's that? *(Beat)* Oh. Yeah. Plenty for a story. There is a lot to tell here. Important things. Yeah. For sure. *(Beat)* How do I--*(Pause)* yeah, no, I heard you. *(Beat)* I feel fine. Yes. Yeah. I feel good. No, it stopped hurting. Yeah. My head feels fine. *(Beat)* It feels fine. Thank you for asking. I appreciate it. So anyway, I will be home in about two

weeks or so. Yeah of course. I will be in touch. I will let you know when I'm home. When I'm safe. I'm going to enjoy the quiet. I'm sorry? Did I find her? *(A long pause)* Yes, I'm here. Sorry. I was distracted by the light. It's so...it's so golden here. Like a lion's eye. Yeah anyway. I will be home soon. What? I didn't --oh yes, right. Of course. *(Beat)* No. I didn't. I didn't find her. *(Beat)* Yeah I'm sure you're right. Just an old ghost story. Just a fairy tale. The child of lions. *(Beat)* Yep. Ok. Sounds good. I will be home soon. Good bye.

Marc hangs up the phone and puts it away. He sits, quietly. Content to wait. He thinks he hears something beyond him and turns to look. He sees nothing. But perhaps there is a shimmer of a twinkle of something gold in the distance. He turns back, unsure. And after a moment, the sound of a train whistle. He settles back in. He is about to go home.

Lights fade as the train approaches.

END OF PLAY.