Girl and Giraffe

| Also by Lydia Millet |

Omnivores

George Bush, Dark Prince of Love

My Happy Life

Everyone's Pretty

Oh Pure and Radiant Heart

How the Dead Dream

Love in Infant Monkeys

Lydia Millet

| *stories* |

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THE MAN CALLED GEORGE Adamson lived a long life, long and rough and most of it in the African bush. He set up house in a tent with a thatch roof and dirt floor, full of liquor and books. He smoked a pipe with a long stem, sported a white goatee and went around bare-chested in khaki shorts—a small, fit man, deeply tanned. He was murdered in his eighty-third year by Somali lion poachers.

Joy Adamson, his wife and the author of *Born Free*, had been stabbed to death a few years before. She bled out alone, on the road where she fell. They were somewhat estranged by the time of Joy's death. They had cats instead of children—George had raised scores of lions, while Joy had moved on from lions to cheetahs to

leopards—and lions and leopards could not cohabit, so George and Joy lived apart. They maintained contact, but they were hundreds of miles distant.

Two of George's adoptive children, Girl and Boy, had come to live with him in the early nineteen-sixties. This was in Kenya, where the Second Battalion of the Scots Guards was stationed to fight a mutiny in Dar-es-Salaam. It was the tail end of the British empire in East Africa.

When Girl and Boy were nine months old, the Scots Guards brought them to the plains beneath Mount Kenya, to a farm where a British company was filming *Born Free*. Along with twenty-two other lions, Girl and Boy had roles in the movie. Afterward most of the lions were sent to zoos, where they would live out their lives in narrow spaces. But Girl and Boy were given to Adamson, who had become attached to them during filming. He took them to a place named Meru, where he made a camp.

Meru was in red-earth country, with reticulated giraffes browsing among the acacia and thornbush. Zebras roamed in families and the odd solitary rhino passed through the brush; there were ostriches, too, and an aging elephant named Rudkin, who plundered tomatoes.

Girl was one of Adamson's success stories whereas her brother, Boy, was an extravagant failure; yet Boy was the one that Adamson deeply loved.

Girl had been fed all her life, but she took readily to the hunt. Her first kill was a jeering baboon, her second an eland with a broken leg, her third a baby zebra. From there she took down a full-grown cow eland and was soon accomplished. Meanwhile Boy did not feel moved to kill for himself; he merely feasted off the animals she brought down.

So Girl became a wild lion, but Boy did not. Boy remained close to Adamson all his life, often in camp, between two worlds. Though he made forays into the wild, he did not vanish within it. And on one occasion, hanging around camp while people were visiting, he stuck his head into a jeep and bit the arm of a seven-year-old boy. This boy was the son of the local park warden; soon an order came down for Boy's execution.

But before Adamson could carry out the shooting—he was busy protesting to bureaucrats, who declined to listen—Boy was found under a bush with a porcupine quill through one eye and a broken leg. If not euthanized on the spot he would have to be moved; so Adamson sat on the ground beside him until the veterinarian

could fly in, by turns drinking whiskey, brandishing his rifle and sleeping.

After triage in camp Adamson prepared for an airlift to a better-equipped facility. He and Boy would live on a private estate of Joy's while he nursed the animal back to health. And as they were loading the lion into Adamson's pickup for the airstrip, Girl—though she had barely seen her brother for a year—emerged suddenly from the bush. She jumped onto the back of the truck, where Boy lay sedated and wrapped in a blanket. No one was able to entice her away, so they began the drive to the airstrip with Girl along for the ride.

But on the way she spotted a young giraffe by the road and became distracted. She jumped off the pickup. She was a wild lion now, and wild lions are hungry.

That was the last time Adamson saw Girl and the last time she saw any of them. Later, when Adamson returned to Meru, he would search for her fruitlessly.

Boy grew irritable in temperament after the surgery, due to the steel rod in his leg: And who among us might not become cantankerous? Two years after he and Girl were parted, he suddenly attacked a man named Stanley who had tended him with gentle care through illness and injury. Adamson heard a scream

and went running with his rifle to find that Boy had bitten deep into Stanley's shoulder; he turned and shot his beloved lion through the heart and then tended to his friend, who bled to death from a severed jugular inside ten minutes.

In Adamson's autobiography the end of Boy is well described, while the end of Girl, who lived out her days in the wild, is invisible. Happy endings often are.

But there is one more report of Girl outside Adamson's published writings. It was made by a man who claimed to have visited Adamson in his camp the year before his murder, one Stefan Juncker based in Tübingen, Germany. Juncker said he had made a pilgrimage to see Adamson at Kora, where he was living with his final lions. Since Adamson constantly welcomed guests to his camp, such a visit would not have been uncommon.

The two men sat beside a fire one night and Adamson—in his cups, which the German implied was not rare—became melancholy. He remembered a time when he had not been alone, before his wife and his brother had died. He remembered his old companions, sitting there at the base of the hills among the boulders and the thornbush; he remembered all his lions, his women and his men.

His brother Terence, who had lived with him at Kora, had in his dotage discovered that he had what Adamson called "a talent for divining." By wielding a swinging pendulum over a map, he could determine the location of lost or wanted things. This included water, missing persons and lions, which he correctly located about 60 percent of the time. Adamson was skeptical in theory, not being much given to magical thinking, but had to admit that his brother's method led him to his lions faster than spoor- or radio-based tracking. It was inexplicable, he said, but there it was.

Since Terence had died of an embolism two years before, Adamson no longer had a diviner.

At this point Adamson gestured toward a flower bush a few feet away. That was where Terence lay now, he said. And there, he said, turning, over there by a tree was dear Boy's grave; he had buried his favorite lion himself, though others had dug up the corpse later to see proof that he was dead. He had been forced to rebury him several times.

The German was disturbed. He did not like the fact that Adamson had laid his brother to rest a stone's throw from a killer.

There was much that science had not yet understood,

went on Adamson, about the minds of lions and men and how they might meet. Divining was one example—had the lions somehow told Terence where they could be found?—but he had also known others. In fact, he said, he would tell of an odd event he had once witnessed. Over the years he had thought of it now and then, he said; and at this point a warm, low wind sprang up from the Tana River and blew out the embers of their campfire, sinking them into darkness.

He had thought of it over the years, he repeated, but he had mentioned it to no one. He would tell it, if the German could keep a secret.

Of course, lied the German.

It was when he was first taking Girl out to hunt. This was in Meru, he said, in the mid-nineteen-sixties. Of course now, more than twenty years later, Girl would have to be long dead.

All your stories end with someone dead, said the German.

All *my* stories? asked Adamson.

He and Girl had been walking through the forest together and had emerged into a clearing, where they surprised a herd of giraffes browsing. The herd quickly took off, galloping away before Adamson had a chance

to count them, but they left behind a gangly foal without the sense to run. Perfect prey. It should fall easily. It stood stupidly, blinking, backed up against a large tree.

Girl charged, with Adamson standing by proudly. She had made several kills in the preceding days and he considered her a prodigy.

But abruptly she stopped, pulling up short. Her ears were flat; then they pricked. She and the foal seemed to be studying each other. Adamson was shocked, bordering on indignant, but he remained in the copse. Possibly Girl sensed something wrong with the giraffe, he thought; or possibly there were other predators behind it, competition in the form of a clan of hyenas he could not see.

As he waited Girl stood unmoving, crouched a few feet from her quarry. Then the giraffe reached up slowly and mouthed a branch with its mobile, rubbery lips. It chewed.

Adamson was flabbergasted. Possibly the animal recognized his lion as a neophyte hunter: But how could it? Giraffes were not insightful; they had the dullness of most placid grazers. Either way, the animal should be bolting. Girl would be on him in a second, fast as light.

He could see Girl only from the rear; her tail twitched,

her shoulders hunched. He could not see her face, which frustrated him, he told the German, for a lion's face is extraordinary in its capacity for expression. What was she waiting for?

Then again, he thought, as he watched the stillness between them and held his own breath, the foal was going nowhere. Maybe Girl was hypnotized by the future: Maybe she saw the arc of her own leap, was already feeling the exhilaration of flight and the impact, the smell and weight of the foal as it crumpled beneath her, as she dragged and wrestled and tore it down, worried the tough hide and sweet flesh. Possibly she was waiting, pent up and ready.

But no. Girl straightened; she relaxed. She sniffed around the foal's long legs. She jumped onto a dry log. She yawned.

And the giraffe kept eating, munching and grunting softly. It shifted on its feet; it stooped down, head dipping toward Girl and up again to the branches, where it tore and chewed, tore and chewed, with a complacent singularity of purpose.

There was sun on the log, glancing across the nape of the lion's neck so that her face was illuminated, the rest of her in shadow. She licked a paw and lay down.

Adamson, squatting in the bushes, stayed put. His body was still but his mind worked hard, puzzling. He considered giraffes. Terence had a weakness for elephants; himself, he was strictly a lion man. But giraffes, though morphological freaks, had never interested either of them. Artiodactyla, for one thing: the order of camel, swine and bovids. Not suited for long-term relationships. Strictly for riding, eating or milking, really. He pitied them, but not much. There were no refrigerators in nature, after all; meat and milk had to keep themselves fresh.

After years in the bush he saw all animals as predators or prey. The tourists that came through his camp wanting to pet the lions? Now those were strictly prey, he mused.

Then, recalled to the present after a pause: No offense.

None taken, said the German heartily.

In fact the German had felt a prickle of annoyance. The flight in, on a single-engine Cessna in jolting turbulence, had made him squeeze his eyes shut and pray silently to a God in whom he did not believe. For this?

An old alcoholic, he thought angrily, with poor hygiene—that was all. He had been eight years of age when he saw *Born Free*, living in a claustrophobic

bourgeois household in Stuttgart. His father was fat as blood sausage and his mother used a bottle of hairspray a week. He thought Adamson and his beautiful wife were like Tarzan and Jane.

But Kirsten had disapproved of this trip, and she was probably right: nothing more than a midlife crisis.

The smoke from Adamson's pipe was spicy. The German was disgusted by smoking—frankly, any man fool enough to do it deserved what he got—but he had to admit the pipe smelled far better than cigarettes.

You were saying, the German reminded him. Girl and giraffe?

Yes, said Adamson softly.

The old man was frail, thought the German, with the ranginess of a hungry dog; his muscles had no flesh between them. He had nothing to spare.

So Girl had lain there on the log in the sun, dozing while the giraffe moved from tree to tree. The sun crossed the sky and clouds massed, casting a leaden grayness over the low hills. Adamson stayed seated in the scrub, drank from a flask and puffed on his pipe. There was a silver elegance to the day, which was unusually mild and breezy; he listened to the wind rattle the branches and whisper the dry grass. Birds alit in the

trees and moved off—he noticed mostly black-headed weavers and mourning doves—and Girl and the giraffe ignored them. The shadows grew longer; the sun was sinking. Adamson began to feel impatient, pulled back to camp. He had things he should do before dark.

It was almost dusk when the giraffe moved. It ambled over and bent its head to Girl again, who stirred.

While it is not true, said Adamson solemnly to the German, that giraffes never lie down, as legend has it, it *is* true that they do so rarely and for a very short time. And never, he said, in his experience, did they lie down at the feet of their predators.

And yet this was what the foal did.

It had been a good day, said Adamson, and raised his glass.

As he talked, the German had built up the fire again, and now he saw the flames reflecting off amber. He was regretting his choice. The choice had been between Africa or Mallorca, where his wife was now suntanning.

The foal lay down deliberately, said Adamson, right beside the dry log. It was deliberate.

And Girl stretched her legs, as a cat will do, luxurious and long, all four straight out at their fullest reach like table legs. She stretched and rose, jumped languidly

off the log and paused. Then she leaned down over the foal and sank in her teeth.

The movement, said Adamson, was gentle. The foal barely struggled; its legs jerked reflexively but soon it was still.

Later, he said, he almost believed he had dreamed the episode. But he came to believe, over the years, that a call and answer had passed between Girl and the giraffe: the foal had asked for and been granted reprieve. Girl had given him a whole afternoon in which to feel the thorny branches and leaves in his mouth, the sun and shade cross his neck, his heavy lashes blink in the air.

It was a free afternoon, because all afternoon the foal had been free of the past and free of the future. Completely free.

It was almost, said Adamson, as though the possibilities of the world had streamed through Girl and the giraffe: And he, a hunched-over primate in the bushes, had been the dumb one, with his insistent frustration at that which he could not easily fathom, his restless, churning efforts to achieve knowledge. Being a primate, he watched; being a primate, he was separate forever. The two of them opened up beyond all he knew of their natures, suspended. They were fluid in time and space,

and between them flowed the utter acceptance of both of their deaths.

They had been together, said Adamson, closer than he had ever been to anyone. They had given; they had given; they had shimmered with spirit.

Spirits, thought the German, glancing at the luminous dial of his watch: yes indeed. Bushmill's, J&B, Ballantine, Cutty Sark and Glenlivet on special occasions.

This was in Kenya in the late nineteen-eighties, decades after the Mau Mau rebellion brought the deaths of two hundred whites and twenty thousand blacks. A new homespun corruption had replaced the old foreign repression; fewer and fewer lions roamed the grasslands of East Africa, and the British were long gone.