SAFARI

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In the jungle

I don't know who I am.

I can't see a thing; my head hurts bad and I can hardly move. I hear a sound like someone was slicing me up with a chainsaw.

Sorry. I'm wrong. It can't be the sound of a chainsaw although I'm definitely not an expert in chainsaws. It sounds more like the huffing and puffing of an animal – although I'm not an expert in animals either.

Now that I think about it... an animal?

It can't be but it is. It's the growling of a rabid dog ready to pounce on me. I try to think but I can't. I think I got creamed, that's why I've got this bump on my forehead and I can't remember anything. The more I try to think, the worse it hurts. I don't know who I am or what my name is. The only thing I can remember is a really nice girl smiling and talking non-stop and her name is Mary Jo; that's one thing I know for sure. When I think about her I get a sweet chocolaty taste in my mouth and I feel like putting my arms around her even though she's not here with me now. Now that's a nice memory. Suddenly, something grabs hold of my arm and howls, this time really up close, so close I can feel its breath hot on my skin. I open my eyes. And then I close them again, scared to death. It's a wild beast half an inch from my face. I see its enormous snout and long, sharp teeth. I feel its breath on my left cheek and the heat of its body through my t-shirt. This has got to be a dream, I say, trying to convince myself, and then I open my eyes again like when I wake up in the middle of the night, confused, no connection with the real world, thirsty, feeling my way down the hall to the kitchen not knowing whether I'm awake or asleep.

But not this time. This is not a dream. This is real. I'm trapped under a giant, hairy, scary beast. A giant monkey. I know it's a monkey because it looks like King Kong, the one in the movie. Or maybe a cousin or a brother of his. And I am his prisoner.

<If I play dead, maybe he'll ignore me and go away> I tell myself and so I stay really still, holding my breath.

But the peace and quiet doesn't last for long. I note that his hair seems to stand up on end and his heart starts pounding – beating like a drum bum-bum bum-bum— and then suddenly, without any warning, he starts jumping up and down giving out terrifying cries. All of this is very real and it doesn't look good for me at all. I'm dead meat. The

beast that wants to eat me up is surrounded by other beasts the same as him who all cry out, scream, yell, and beat their chests as they get closer and closer. Dangerously closer. What a ruckus I've caused.

It's clear, they're fighting over who gets to eat me.

And then suddenly I remember everything. My name, my hamster's name, that I'm lost in the African jungle and I'm totally alone. I can't cry out for help. I can't do anything.

And what would you do in my situation?

Sorry.

I'm sure you don't have any idea what I'm talking about. You must be wondering who on earth I am and what on earth I'm doing in the middle of the jungle in the claws of a hungry ape who's about to rip me to pieces.

And rightfully so.

So I guess I'll start from the beginning and tell you the whole story. About my family, the lions and Mary Jo.

2

Mary Jo

It's been years since anyone has spoken to me or even sent a word in my general direction and I guess that's why I was so surprised when the girl in white pants who arrived carrying an armload of books sat down next to me and whispered in my ear,

"Do you mind if I hold your hand?"

I don't know if I made some face, I'm not used to answering questions, but she didn't mind; she was scared to death. She squeezed my hand really hard, closed her eyes and held her breath until the rumbling of the engines died down and the red lights went off. Then, the girl gave a sigh of relief and let go of my hand. When she started looking out the window, her faced relaxed and she gave me a pretty smile. We were flying over a sea of wavy clouds that looked like a snowy ski slope in spring. The plane glided happily through the bluest sky I had ever seen, illuminated by a dazzling sun.

We were on a plane going to Africa, I don't know if I told you that. I didn't mention either that it was summer and I was going on a safari with my parents and my sister.

I guess you're wondering where my family was all this time. Close by. In the triple seats in the middle section across the aisle and I was next to the window and in the company

of that loopy traveler. But I don't mind traveling alone, soon you'll understand why. When I looked up, my eyes met the girl's violet eyes.

"Hi. How are you? I'm Mary Jo." And she offered me a bag of candy.

"Come on, have some. Candy calms you down."

I didn't argue. I grabbed a good handful of multicolored jelly beans and I stuffed them in my mouth, making sure my father didn't see me because he would have made some comment about cavities – a stupid obsession he's been into lately. I slowly chewed the sugary mass that was full of bubbles that tickled my tongue while I listened to my seatmate's voice chattering on and on about everything in general and nothing in particular as if she had known me all her life. She had a voice like cream pie, the perfect voice for telling stories and singing lullabies. I really liked Mary Jo. She was friendly and pretty. We became good friends and I felt good sitting next to her, letting the hours slide by without having to do anything, just listening to her talk. There were times when I got a little lost maybe because she was using strange words like *ethnography, field investigation, doctorand, primates, predators, carrion* and things like that. But when she said them it sounded like the names of fairies and other legendary creatures: *emotigraphy*, *poppy fields, merry-go-rounds, primroses, pretzels, carnival.* That's how sweetly Mary Jo spoke or how sweetly my ears heard the things she said.

I just sat there smiling and nodding my head up and down while I stared into her eyes. The funny thing is that she didn't even notice that I never opened my mouth. Or maybe she just didn't think it was such a big deal.

Mary Jo wasn't like the others. She didn't torture me with questions or give me the third degree, things like: <what's your name?> or <how old are you?> or <what do you want to be when you grow up?> Frankly, I don't know any kid who goes around asking grown-ups how old they are or where they want to be buried when they die.

Mary Jo had really good manners. She respected my silence and told me a million things I forgot instantly. But don't think I wasn't listening, I caught the most important things about her right off. Let me give you a summary: she was a graduate student who was going to Africa to study primates – that is, apes – and she was really happy because it was the dream of a lifetime, a dream she had to pay for out of her own pocket by serving pizza, cleaning cages at the zoo and working as a school lunchroom monitor. She told me the heaviest job was lunchroom monitor because the kids were horrible, they hid the spinach, the peas and the broccoli in the most incredible places, places where not even the Gestapo would have found them, according to her.

I looked at her totally amazed. This was a unique and fascinating moment. It was me and it wasn't me. Mary Jo didn't look at me like the others, for her I was special. There was a moment when everything became unreal. Her words sounded like they came from a faraway magical place, as if we were in a movie. Actually, I was **someone else.** Every once in while I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I was soaring through the clouds and I stumbled across this disoriented angel.

INT/DAY – PLANE FLYING TO AFRICA

The famous star MARY JO sits next to the NAMELESS TRAVELER who eats jellybeans and listens to her speak with a dumb expression on his face.

MARY JO, flirtingly, speaks to her travel companion

MARY JO (*winking at him*)

Can you guess where those little brats hide their vegetables?

NAMELESS TRAVELER (me) smiles but doesn't answer. Silence. MARY JO doesn't mind.

MARY JO *(Moving her hands)*

In their hair, yes. And stuffed down their underpants. And even in the cases of their cell phones.

They both laugh. NAMELESS TRAVELER doesn't mention the fact that he hates green vegetables and those hiding places she tells him about seem totally ingenious.

MARY JO *(Sighing)* I hate buses. I never know when I have to get off. The Subway is more poetic, more popular, don't you think?

NAMELESS TRAVELER makes an affirmative gesture, agreeing with her so that she's happy. He likes making her happy.

MARY JO Wow, I must be making you dizzy. Sometimes I can be a bit scatterbrained.

NAMELESS TRAVELER agrees with her again but make it clear from the look in his eyes that he loves it when she makes him dizzy with her delightfully scatterbrained stories.

MARY JO *(remembering)*

Working at a pizza parlor is dangerous, you'd better believe it. Once a guy pointed a gun at me for serving him a *quattro stagioni* without mozzarella.

NAMELESS TRAVELER is fascinated. He's never met anyone able to jump so naturally from one subject to another like a butterfly flitting from flower to flower.

MARY JO looks out the window and murmurs.

MARY JO

Alright, to tell the truth I've never seen one in the wild. I can only imagine what they're like.

NAMELESS TRAVELER doesn't ask her what she's talking about. Sooner or later she'll get around to it, so shut up and listen.

MARY JO

Look at me. What do you see? An anthropologist who's going to study chimpanzees or a phony?

NAMELESS TRAVELER only sees MARY JO, a marvelous character who is telling him her life story and confessing her innermost fears.

MARY JO

I'm crazy. I'm going to work under Dr. Stevenson, the best primatologist in the world. Yeah, yeah, I know what you're thinking. Stevenson. The American. The guy who wrote *Chimps Lie Too*.

NAMELESS TRAVELER fakes surprise, which is what she is expecting from him, so he puts his hands to his head and exaggerates just a little. MARY JO gets carried away by emotion. **MARY JO** *(crying out)*

It's incredible, simply incredible! I can't even believe it myself. That's why I'm shaking so.

See?

MARY JO raises her hand to show him how, indeed, it's trembling.

MARY JO *(theatrically)*

I'm an impostor.

NAMELESS TRAVELER CANDYMAN shakes his head emphatically.

MARY JO *(whispers a confession)*

I feel, how can I say it?, like I'm in a movie, like I've been cast to play the role of an anthropologist.

NAMELESS TRAVELER CANDYMAN is overjoyed by the coincidence and wants to tell her that there's no way she's an impostor because impostors are tricky and devious and want to fool others, pretending to be what they're not. And that's simply not true in her case.

MARY JO *(looking tenderly at him)*

You understand me. I knew it from the moment we met.

NAMELESS TRAVELER swallows hard. They both look deeply into each other's eyes.

OFF MOTHER *(with a shrill voice)*
Africa!

The scene deflates like a balloon when my mother yanks me off the screen and back into reality. The plane is going down and you can see African land below. Isn't it amazing how mothers' voices can spoil everything: books, Playstation, dreams, movies.
And as if it were their battle cry, all my family charges across the aisle and piles up on my seat to look out the window.
Mary Jo gave off a whistle that nobody heard.
I didn't say anything. By the way, did I mention that I was mute?

3
My family

We were flying over Africa when my family came barreling across the aisle of the plane to look out my window. They all piled onto my seat, passing over poor Mary Jo and pressing their three noses against the glass, their eyes shining with excitement.
I was a bit ashamed in front of my new friend and travel companion but I forgave them since it was the first time we had ever flown in an airplane and we were in a new continent.

"Where are the lions? I don't see any lions!"

That was my mother who's obsessed with the topic.

"Isn't there anyone young on the plane? This looks like a senior citizens' cruise."

That typically teenage sentence came from my sister, a kid who's fourteen, almost fifteen who thinks she seventeen but acts like she's eleven. She was already bored.

"This place is full of swamps. They must be full of anopheles mosquitoes. Did everyone take their malaria pills?"

That dumb comment was my father's who's a real pain in the neck when it comes to disease.
As you can see, my family is a little weird, don't you think? I didn't say anything, as usual, but I know how Mary Jo must have felt, being buried under all those arms and legs.

"The Gombe jungle!" she cried out, excited.

My family heard the voice of the innocent traveler. and reacted. My parents and my sister got up surprised and studied her for a moment, each one trying to figure out how to attack her, each one from a different angle. Poor Mary Jo. She had no idea what had just fallen on top of her. I was worried that my family would make me look absolutely ridiculous. As usual.

“Hi, I'm Lulu. Do you know if there will be any Australians at the hotel? I've heard they're cute and really tribal and that they liked tattoos. I want to get one on my bellybutton but my parents won't let me.”

That was my sister, as I'm sure you guessed.

“Be quiet, Lulu, don't bother the lady. Don't you see she very pale? Are you alright, miss? You must have low blood pressure. Young people nowadays! I'm Albert, pleased to meet you.”

And my father held out his hand as if he were the family doctor although actually he repairs bicycles.

My mother who works in an accounting office but has the spirit of a circus acrobat, also held out her hand.

“I'm Rita, Danny's mother. I hope it wasn't too boring having to sit next to him. He's a good boy but he has this really big problem. We're hoping this trip will cure him. A safari might just be the thing for him. Facing those lions again and all that. Getting over his fear. That's the best medicine we can give him.”

Poor Mary Jo didn't understand anything but my parents are used to talking to me and to me never answering them so they didn't bother translating what they said.

“This safari is our last chance. I'm sure that Danny will relive his trauma and come around,” my mother sighed.

“We'll see about that. A safari could be dangerous. But I want to try a change in latitude. Maybe the electromagnetic waves here could be the key to his recovery.”

“We're here for the safari, Albert.”

“We'll see about that, Rita.”

“What do you mean <we'll see>? *What* will we *see?”*

“The trip is already paid for. Otherwise...”

“We won the trip in a drawing from cans of tuna,” my sister explained. “My mother was really hung up about the contest so she bought tons of cans of tuna until we finally won. We got food poisoning three times this winter.”

"She had to go to the emergency room because she has a strange allergy to tuna. She got these nasty sores on the soles of her feet and had to stay in observation for a week. Lulu is very sensitive."

Did I mention that my father is crazy about diseases? The stranger the better.

"That time they actually had to worry about *me* for a change. Usually it's Danny who gets all the attention."

Danny is me if you had figured it out by now. And yes, my sister hates me because I went mute and I stole all the attention. For me, you can have all the attention back! She's always griping me out for being a spoiled kid, a phony, mom and dad's pet.

"Please, Lulu, be a little more considerate to your poor, sick brother," my mother scolded her.

"You see what I mean!? He's the poor sick-o and I'm always the bad guy."

"By the way, what's your name?" my father politely asked.

"Mary Jo."

"Great, Mary Jo! We'll be getting to know each other. Have you come on the safari?" The flight attendant's voice announced that we were about to land. The <fasten seat belts> lights came on and we had to sit down.

I noticed how Mary Jo gave a big sigh of relief when my family finally disappeared. She immediately treated me to another handful of jellybeans from her magic bag of tricks. She took my hand and smiled.

"They seem like nice people. If you knew the tourists at the pizza parlor... Now *those* are scary folks."

And it was right there and then that I realized that I was in love with Mary Jo. It was the first time I'd been in love.

I don't know if I told you but I'm only eleven years old. Almost twelve.

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The lions

Mary Jo went one way and my family and I went another. It was sad, really sad. Before she left, she turned around with her backpack, her books and her cool explorer's hat, she smiled at me and gave me kisses on both cheeks. I didn't give her my cell phone number because my mom had the dumb idea – almost all her ideas are dumb – to make us leave our cell phones at home.

“Thanks a lot, Danny. You really cheered me up. I'm sure we'll meet again. Good luck!”

I was paralyzed while I saw her get on top of a 4×4. I wanted to ask her to stay a little longer because I had a whole bunch of things I wanted to tell her but you all know I can't even make a peep and that's a problem.

I used to be able to speak. Until one day, on my fifth birthday, my folks took me to the zoo to celebrate. There are birthdays and birthdays and that birthday was unforgettable. I fell into the lions' pit. And since then, I've been mute.

The doctors said I was traumatized although I think it's my family who was traumatized, not me. They all felt guilty. My mom because of her obsession with lions and for wanting me to see them really close up. My father had gone for coffee a few minutes before and wasn't there when it happened. My sister pushed me so I could see even better, the way she always pushed me when my mother held me in her arms. Go figure what happened. All I know is that I fell into the lions' area and froze. I didn't cry or scream or move a muscle. At least that's what they told me later. They also said that my mother who's very impulsive jumped in after me and held off the lions with a shoe. I don't know, a shoe isn't much help when a lion opens his mouth to eat it, hand and all, but that's the way my mom is. First she does things and then she thinks.

I guess we were lucky because the lions had just had lunch and so they weren't very hungry. Still I've got to say that my mom was really brave and saved my life.

That's what they said in the newspapers.

And after that, I never spoke again.

I can read and write. I'm a reader, the blessed few that are left – that's what my teacher says. I write really fast. To communicate, I have to write everything down. On WhatsApp, on bubble-gum wrappers, on post-its and even on my hand if I have to. I'm a writer out of necessity. I have to make myself understood somehow but without overdoing it. What else can I do? As for hearing, I can hear perfectly well. People think that being mute means being deaf and they talk about me as if weren't there in front of them. And when they yell at me they yell really loud and that hurts my ears. At school, the teachers put me on the first row as if I were deaf and send information to my folks over the Internet as if I were blind. One good thing: they all say I'm a really good boy because I don't talk or cut up in class. They're crazy about me. If the teachers had their way, they would toss all the kids into the lions' pit if they came out mute like me.

I learned sign language – that's really cool – but I can only use it with my family – they also had to learn – and with the psychologist from the school who has a diploma or something like that. But sometimes she gets mixed up and I laugh so hard. She never gets the signs right and I even invent new ones just to throw her off. It's my own private game and I'm the only one who knows how to play.

In first grade, I was famous because of the story about the zoo. Not everybody falls into the lions' pit and comes out safe and sound. The rest of the kids in the class were always bothering me, looking for tooth and claw marks on my body under my clothes and asking me a lot of questions but when they saw I never answered and that I wasn't missing any fingers or toes, little by little they lost curiosity and finally left me alone.

But don't think it was easy for me. It's tough being invisible. Nobody ever invited me to parties or asked me to play and they always took my place on the bus. But that's not the worst part; when they found out I never told on them, they started hitting me and throwing things at me: paper wads, pieces of chalk, even those dried out pieces of bread that get forgotten in the bottom of the backpack.

My classmates could be really imaginative when it came to torturing me. Every summer I shudder to think what they'll do to me next year. Especially, Mustache; he's been held back for so many courses, he even has a mustache already. Studying was not his specialty so he preferred making life miserable for everybody else. And, naturally, I was his favorite target. Every year he had something new and original for me. One year he enjoyed pulling the chair out from under me when I was going to sit down. I didn't cry, I just sat there on the floor in silence. He loved it. Last course, he liked to turn off the hot water when I was taking a shower in PE. He liked it because I never complained; I just opened my mouth and swallowed all the water I could. That's why I guess last year he specialized in pushing me into the swimming pool and holding me underwater while The Mouth (who told everything) got out his watch and timed how long the Mute (that's me) could go without breathing. I broke all the records. I must be some sort of freak of nature.

Everybody else just looked the other way.

I bet you're wondering why I haven't written down all these things they did to me – since I write so much anyway and I get good grades on my compositions – and show it to someone. The answer is easy: no one would believe me. I haven't even tried because after all, I'm just a freaky kid and it's natural that weird things happen to me. I'm used to it. What I'm not used to is my family.

They get really obsessed about things.

My folks and my sister, each in their own way, have taken it on themselves to make me speak again even though I beg them to leave me alone and not overwhelm me. <Overwhelm> in sign language is supercomplicated so that's why I wrote the word on a sheet of paper and hung it on my bedroom door: <STOP OVERWHELMING ME!> But they don't listen. They've tried everything. My father gave me Bach flowers, he did reiki on me and took me all sorts of psychologists, neurologists, mediums, speech therapists and acupuncturists but nothing has worked. My mother's really original; she gives me strong emotions and excitement thinking that maybe that's the way to shake me out of the trauma, by making me repeat and relive the horror of the moment. When she told me I got chills.

Can you imagine getting in a car with your mother never knowing if one day she'll get it into her head to crash the car into a tree so that maybe you'll start talking again? Well, my mother is one of those. I go on the most dangerous rides in the amusement park, I've jumped out of airplanes, I've gone whitewater rafting, hang gliding, I've jumped off the highest diving board and I've spent three hours hanging from a cable car. Nothing works. Everything's useless. I didn't even yell. Nothing.

Lulu, who's jealous to the bone, rubs my nose in it every day, saying that I like being mute and if I didn't speak it was because I simply didn't want to. She blamed me for her being nothing for mom and dad because they only cared about me.

If you only knew how hard it was when nobody understands you, when everybody looks at you like a weird-o, a nutcase or just ignores you. It's really sad to be left out, to not belong anywhere.

And then one day you decide that nothing matters and so you give up. Communicate? What for? I don't even think about what I would like to do, what I want to be anymore.

Who can I tell? Who cares anyway?

You know it would be great if instead of being a boy, I were an ant. One of those that can carry bread crumbs two hundred times bigger than they are. Life would be so much easier. I'd cross paths with millions and millions of ants and we would say hello to each other with our antennas wiggling silently and nobody would pick on me anymore. Ants don't speak, they don't need to. They're the smartest creatures on the planet. I read somewhere that they can even survive a nuclear explosion. Or was it the cockroaches? Even so, no matter what anybody says, talking is simply no good.

At least that's what I thought until the moment I met Mary Jo. Since then, I don't want to be an ant anymore. I like Mary Jo more than I like ants. She treated me like a real person. She looked at me with those eyes so sweetly and she read me like one of those books she carried around. She talked to me. And I talked to her.

And from that moment on, I wanted to be sitting next to Mary Jo, eating jellybeans and flying above the clouds and just listening her to talk about *quattro stagioni* pizzas, primates and jungles and whatever. I just want to close my eyes and hold her hand and star in a movie with her while the airplane goes into a nose dive and I feel a cool tingling in my stomach.

Africa, the safari, the family and the ants didn't mean anything to me anymore. On my first night in Africa, I dreamed about Mary Jo.