

JON PEARSON

Wazungu

There are sixteen thousand species of moss on Earth and counting. I don't know why I mention this, because what I really want to talk about is how much I love my wife. Moss were the first plants to come out of the water and onto land. Moss again. My wife has small hands. They aren't noticeably small. They are just small. Smaller than mine. And soft. Smooth. Delicate. Ladylike. Sometimes I'll be lying in bed with Elya, my wife, and I'll pull my right arm out from under the blankets and hold it straight out so I can examine the back of my hand. I'll angle it slowly and study it. People say I have nice-looking hands. I once thought of being a hand model. I'll say to Elya, "Hold your hand out." And she does. Which is a minor miracle to me (having been single most of my life) that I can ask someone to do something and they just do it. Because they love you. Simple. Like moss. The leaves of moss are one cell thick, which means there is practically no separation between them and their environment. If that isn't love, I don't know what is. If moss is stuck to something wet, it's wet. If it's stuck to something dry, it's dry. I wonder: If it's stuck to something brave, is it brave?

My hand makes me feel manly, my hand being larger than my wife's hand and all. I feel like a cowboy. A man's man. The strong, silent type. But also, secretly, kind and protective, like Papa Bear in the Goldilocks story; but a buff Papa Bear, one who does push-ups and watches his cholesterol. I say, "Baby, you have such beautiful hands." Then I'll say something like, "Where did you get them?" Just for the hell of it. And because I *know* it isn't something her "ex" would *ever* have said. He was serious, controlling, a lawyer. They met at Stanford Law School, my wife and her ex. My wife is now an *ex*-lawyer. I am the opposite of a lawyer. Compared to her ex, I am practically a circus clown. I can't control a thing and don't want to.

I would, however, like to blanket my wife with a thin, protective coating. I'd like my one-cell-deep self to cover every square inch of her, to permeate her, to stir in her like wind. Then, too, I'd like to be a pirate ship sailing boldly through her bones. See, her ex would *never* say something like that. Moss, it's been around for three hundred and fifty million years, not

thousand, *million* years. Stop and picture that. I can't. I can't picture three hundred and fifty million *anything*. Makes my head want to explode like a great big bag of sugar—which is exactly how much I love my wife—like a bursting bag of sugar the size of the sun.

My wife is in Kenya right now. Kenya. My wife is a saint, a Rolls-Royce. She has gone to Kenya to help Masai girls who have run away from home to avoid forced marriages and sexual mutilation and who want to get an education and go to college. Sexual mutilation. Crap. Forty-four girls ages eight to eighteen. Elya has raised funds for them to go to college, and now is over there sharing poetry and bringing them gifts. Sexual mutilation. Jesus. God. Elya sends me photos. The girls are bright, funny, cheerful, and courageous. They dance and sing and clap their hands. They are delighted to meet my wife. They want to know where I am. "Where is your husband?" they ask, smiling, puzzled. "Why is he not here? Does he not *love* you?" Well, my wife is with a women's group. So I am not there. I am not there *physically*. But *psychically*, I couldn't be *more* there. My great big psychic whale self has swallowed her like Jonah in the Bible and is keeping her safe and sound, though she is halfway around the world. And somehow, since the world is round, it seems small and scuffed, like a tetherball. And my body, it feels like the sky.

I am sitting at a small square table at Starbucks on the corner of National and Barrington in West LA trying to write something about *stopping in the name of love*. I am at the coveted window table next to the fake fireplace. It's 4:30 p.m. on a Wednesday, which means it's 3:30 a.m. on a Thursday in Kenya. My wife is sleeping. I see her lying in a bed ten thousand miles away, sipping air through her perfect nostrils. Nostrils. Yes. Her lovely, intelligent nose. Her award-winning mouth and five-hundred-watt smile. Her mouth is sleeping now. Her perfect woman mouth so full of energy and life, resting now, the way women's mouths do, infinitely, silently, sipping femaleness through a straw running straight to the heart of the earth. Sugar and spice and everything nice. Her face moves forward through space and spreads. She is dreaming about lilac bushes and castles and chandeliers. And, now, because she is in Africa, she has added lions and tigers and gazelles, a hippopotamus, maybe, and a pterodactyl with a plate of ice cream.

I love watching my wife sleep in the morning. I watch her

like a mountain lion, from a place wiser and quieter than myself. "You had any dreams?" I'll ask. "Yeah," she says. "They were intense." They're always intense. For one, they're in Technicolor. "I am going down an escalator..." she'll begin "...and the guy in front of me has a leather suitcase, and one of the clasps is broken. The suitcase is a little greasy; the stain on the side of the suitcase is the shape of South America. At the bottom of the escalator, a woman is cooking enchiladas on a stainless steel, what looks like a Ping-Pong table bolted to a linoleum floor. Then a closet door opens ten feet away and a man appears..." she continues. Turns out, it's her ex-husband in a tuxedo with a teddy bear under his arm. I might ask, "What color were his shoes?" and she'll say, "It's weird, they were saddle shoes, from the fifties, black and white, and he had yellow socks." I'll feel like asking her, then, if she can read the label on the inside of his socks. And, swear to God, she can. Afterward, she'll ask me what I dreamed about and all I can remember is "...something about a red ball and a car going by." I can only imagine what she is dreaming now, with a brain full of Africa. I can see her sleeping, though. I can see her from all angles at once. Like God.

I am staring hard now at the wooden Starbucks table in front of me, trying to lose myself in the grain. I am surrounded by utterly normal-looking total strangers, clusters of young people, mostly. Giggling. Joking. Beaming. Unaware, apparently, that Trump has just been elected president of the United States. My wife is floating above my head. Asleep. Like an angel, a figurine, smooth, crystalline, porcelain, watery, majestic, tiny, all-encompassing. And suddenly, don't ask me why, I imagine myself as a bumblebee pollinating a flower; pollinating the crap out of a flower, a daffodil, a poppy, a begonia, a centurion, an alpha omega. I don't know the names of flowers. But my little head is bobbing and jouncing away, and my tiny hands, if you can call them that, are tearing at the sweet, velvety, I guess "flesh" of the thing. And my name, for some reason, is Eddie. I'm Eddie the bee. Crazy Eddie, the bee that did shitty in school. But took risks, at least. Got candy out of the vending machines without paying and gave it all to his friends. Smoked. Lied. Pissed away his days. But, boy, could he pollinate.

Truth is, I don't exactly know what pollinating entails. According to the American Heritage College Dictionary, "pollinating" means "to transfer pollen from an *anther* to (a female flower) or from a male cone to a female cone." I still

don't know what the hell it means. What's an anther?! I know what a *cone* is, but male and female cones? According to Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, "pollinate" means to "place pollen on the stigma of." The stigma of what!? It just says the "stigma of." I looked up the word "stigma." It's a "scar left by a hot iron."

For the hell of it, I just looked up the word "heaven." It comes from a Greek root that simply means to expand. Nothing about clouds or harps or baby blue skies. Just expand. Get bigger. Which is what my wife is doing with the Masai girls as I sit here thinking about moss, and looking up words, and turning myself into a bumblebee.

One of the Masai girls asked Elya if we had goats and chickens at our house. We live in Mar Vista, just south of the Santa Monica Airport, on a nice paved city street. So, no goats and chickens. You have lunch with a Masai family, they kill a goat. You have lunch in Mar Vista, you maybe go to the Spitfire Café across from the airport. You watch the game on the TV and kids playing soccer or lacrosse on the lawn across the street.

But if you're a twelve-year-old Masai girl, chances are you'll be married off to a sixty-year-old guy, after first getting FGM (female genital mutilation), what they think of as circumcision. To avoid this, you'll have to flee your home and stay away for years in a safe house. My wife has raised thousands of dollars for the girls. Now she is bringing them shoes, scarves, Band-Aids, underwear, vitamin C, and teaching them poems. While they teach her the courage of their innocence. They ask her what it was like being a lawyer in America. The girls want to be doctors, lawyers, teachers. One of them, in a bright yellow dress, is studying "peace and conflict resolution." Her father has stopped drinking and beating her and her mom.

To the Masai, my wife is one of the *wazungu*. *Wazungu!* I love the sound. Makes me think of a comet lighting up the sky or a fifty-foot column of hornets, spinning like a tornado, blasting off like a rocket, spewing sparks and candy in all directions. Turns out, *wazungu* means "white people." So I guess I, too, am one of the *wazungu!* Me, sitting right here at Starbucks.

WHUZZZUNNGUHHHH! The sound fills me with cowbells and drumming and the smell of roasted goat as I stare at the wide leather back of the chair in front of me, a nice chocolatey brown that seems to fatten and bloom as I fall face-first into it. Pure, deep, dark brown, brown-brown, oldest color on earth—the color paint makes when you mix all the colors

together, the color of the bouncy, tall Masai girls, all arms and legs and elbows, with their flashy smiles and sugary laughs and bright sunny dresses. I try to lose myself in the mud brown, the dirt brown, the brownness of the brown. I forget for a minute about Trump and the electoral college and the fate of America. And fall into the rejuvenating brownness as into a crystal ball and wonder, like a seed might wonder, blind and dumb. I wonder into the dirt-deep miracle of growth itself, like a bee or an elephant, from a place beyond thought. I wonder how the Masai girls who have suffered so much ... and have so little ... can be so happy.

Fathoming the earth-brown back of the armchair, I think, again, of moss—how it builds soil, purifies water, makes seed beds, and is a perfect lesson in generosity. A single measly gram of it on the forest floor can be home to hundreds of creatures. And I think then of my beautiful *wazungu* wife, with her little hands and her great big heart and her sleeping mouth and wizardly dreams, who is right now so far away, she might as well be snow falling from the sky above Nairobi, but at the same time, she is in my mouth.

How do those Masai girls do it?! I wonder as I sit here at Starbucks all safe and sound and dumbstruck. How is it their *first* instinct seems to be to clap and dance? And, then, because the world is a little scuffed ball, a Potawatomi word comes to me, an old Potawatomi word, *puhpowee*, which means “the force that causes mushrooms to rise out of the earth at night,” out of the dirt-brown earth. So, thank you, you brave Masai girls. Thank you, you forces of nature. Thank you for making the world a smaller, kinder, better place. Stay good. Stay strong. Stay beautiful beyond words. And thank you for bringing out the *WAZUNGU* in my nice Jewish wife! When she gets back, I promise you, we’ll be dancing on the living room rug, all elbows and arms, all rockets and tornadoes, all hornets and candy, singing and clapping and thinking of you!