

Crystal is hunkered down in her bed writing, and tonight, like every other night, she is pretending she is on safari, deep in the wilds of Africa.

Two years ago when Crystal was ten, she was sick at home for weeks with recurring episodes of strep throat. To keep her entertained, mom checked out lots of old Tarzan movies from the library, and Crystal became enamored of all things African, at least as portrayed by 1930's Hollywood. Now she keeps her unkempt, brown, shoulder-length hair tucked up in an Aussie snap-brim hat. She wears unadorned t-shirts and khaki cargo shorts with knee socks regardless of the weather. At night she wears the same t-shirt to bed accompanied by flannel pajama bottoms found in a Goodwill bin. At one time the pajama bottoms must have belonged to a heavysset boy – the seam in the back could split at any moment; but both the size and the camouflage greens and browns are a perfect fit for Crystal.

Crystal loves using the computer in the school library. She finds web sites from all over the world about safaris on the African continent, and she plans her travel itinerary weeks in advance. On her safaris, she visits with people from various tribes – from pygmies to the Maasai, and she is greeted with gifts of jewelry and pots and colorful cloth. Tribesmen and women prepare a great feast for her, killing a goat and making thick vegetable stews. Laughing children hang on her arms, stroke her hair, and present songs and dances in her honor. Day by day she journeys across the continent – through the savannah, into the bush, down swollen rivers, and up Mt. Kilimanjaro. Sometimes she flies over Victoria Falls or the Kalahari Desert.

Today she is in the Botswana delta.

Like all good adventurers, Crystal is keeping a journal of her exploits. Last Christmas her grandmother gave her a special journal with pictures of World Heritage sites on its hard cover. The pages inside are unlined and the size of Crystal's penmanship changes depending on the

events of the day. When she is excited about sighting a lion, Crystal's scrawl is large and explosive, and takes up most of the page. When she is describing an arduous journey by jeep or the details of a Bakongo village, Crystal uses a small, meticulous hand.

Crystal writes by the light of a headlamp that she tucked away in her room after a camping trip last August. Her mom and Tony were in a hurry to put the supplies back in their box in the basement, and didn't notice it was missing. The light has four different settings, and she keeps it on low.

Crystal's bedroom is warm and muggy, and the window over her dresser is open to catch a little night breeze if one should happen to make its way around her corner of the house. In the dim stillness, Crystal conjures up a dark night with a full moon, just the kind of night for lions and tigers to come calling.

Crystal likes the way the angle from her head on the pillow to her bent knees transforms her pink chenille bedspread into a rough canvas tent, and the Hello Kitty sheets falling around her face make adequate mosquito netting. Crystal props her journal up on thick thighs, and writes with her hand in a downward slant to keep the blue ink in the Bic pen flowing.

*Today I saw a marsh harrier swoop down and grab a striped mouse. We had just gotten back to camp. We had been out on the delta in a small skiff – I think I heard it called a makuro. One of the bushmen was guiding us. I love listening to them talk to each other. I wish I knew how to talk with pops and clicks. I bet they don't get in trouble for sucking their lips. Of course not, unless it means F! U! even in bushmanese. So we were going down the river, and there were elephants off to our right – a whole herd of them, even some young ones. There were crocodiles in the water, too, so we had to be very careful*

*and not rock the boat. Some water buffalo came to the edge of the river to drink. The crocodile looked hungry, so the buffalo stayed away.*

Crystal stops writing and listens for voices outside her bedroom. Tonight was bowling night, and Crystal stays up late on bowling nights. Mom and Tony don't want to pay for a baby sitter, so Crystal has to go along with them to the bowling alley and bring her homework or a book to read. She doesn't bring her journal; that she keeps safe in the drawer of the side table next to her bed along with the headlamp and pen.

The bowling alley is bright and noisy; the fluorescent lights hurt Crystal's eyes. Mom and Tony play in a league and there's usually money on the game. Crystal sits alone at the counter behind the lanes. The bar stool is high and doesn't have a back, and Crystal's legs start tingling before the first game begins. Doug and Susan have a son a grade behind Crystal's in school, but he stays home with an older sister. Carrie, Ann and George's daughter, is in the sixth grade, and twelve the same as Crystal, but she gets to stay home by herself.

Sometimes Ann or Susan gives Crystal a dollar for a soda. The team buys a large pepperoni pizza, and Crystal is offered a slice; but she doesn't much care about eating. Bowling gives her a headache. Crystal starts to feel seasick. The sound of the ball rolling down the lane, the crack of the ball against the pins, the crash of the pins tumbling, careening, falling make her nauseous.

Bowling night gets worse when mom and Tony start to drink. Crystal hates all the yelling that happens at the alley. At first it's an excited yippee or yahoo – “yeah, look at that strike” or “great spare” – but when Tony puts his arm around Susan, congratulating her on her game, mom starts to pout. “I can see what you're doing. Don't think I don't know what you're up to.”

Sometimes the fighting continues when they get home. Mom screams at Tony for messing around on her. Tony turns the tables and says that mom is the flirt – her skirt is too short, her blouse is cut too low. Mom calls him a son of a bitch. He calls her a cunt.

Crystal wants to go back to Africa. She wants to hear the bushmen call to each other across the delta; she wants to hear a lion roar outside her tent.

*It was almost dusk when we returned to camp, and we were just getting ready to have our evening cocktail when a harrier came from out of nowhere and grabbed this small mouse right out from under our noses! When I saw it, I was so excited I almost spilled my drink. As they say, “that would have been a waste of good gin.” At first, the mouse was excited, too. He was yelling to his friends on the ground, “look, look up here, everybody, I’m flying.” But then he got quiet.*

After school on the following day, as she does on every other school day, Crystal volunteers at the First Baptist Church day care center. Mom and Tony found her the job there, because they don’t want her to stay home alone, and they don’t want to pay for after-school care. “It’s good to give back,” they say.

Crystal doesn’t seem to mind. She tells the three-year old class all about Africa. The little kids like the stories about the safaris, but sometimes the teachers think she gets a little carried away. “You have some imagination,” they say, and they direct her back to telling real stories from the Bible. “That’s what these kids need to hear – God’s literal truth – not some made-up story about wild animals and wilder heathens who don’t even know how to speak English. Go on now, you want to talk about animals, tell them about Noah and the Ark.”

The teachers think Crystal is a strange one with her cargo shorts and the on-going saga of Africa. They poke a little fun at her every now and again, but they appreciate the extra free help.

This gives them more time to gossip, and they get all a twitter around 5:00 when it's time for Tony to pick up Crystal. "Whew, he's a good-lookin' man." "Looks real nice in those tight blue jeans." "I'll play Jane to his Tarzan any time." When Crystal overhears them making fun of her, she doesn't seem to mind. It's different when they start to talk about Tony – her breathing quickens and her skin feels prickly.

After snacks, one of the three-year old charges is covered in peanut butter. "I'll take W.A. to wash up," Crystal says.

At first, Crystal takes the children to the bathroom and watches them potty. She touches them just a little when she helps them pull up their pants. But lately she's afraid she's gone too far; she is Tigger climbing the tree – going up and up and up, and not having any plan at all for getting back down.

Today, when she takes W.A. to the bathroom, Crystal says, "Go poop, William Allen." At hearing his full name, W.A.'s face turns as red as his hair. His miniature beer-belly trembles. "I don't need to go poop. I went poop this morning." A slow dribble of snot covers his upper lip.

"W.A., go poop now, or you'll have an accident. If you have an accident then you are nothing short of evil. And if you're evil, you're going straight to hell. That's the god-awful truth. Do you understand me?" W. A. sobs a penitent sob. "I'll try for you, Miss Crystal. I'll try for you."

W. A. squats over the small toilet seat and grunts. "See, I'm trying."

"That's a good boy, W. A. Come here, let me clean you up."

Crystal gets a paper towel from the dispenser and wets it with warm water. She sits back on her heels on the floor. "W. A., lay over my lap." Crystal spreads W.A.'s ass cheeks with her

hands and starts wiping them gently with the wet paper towel. Ever so softly, Crystal begins to sing, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine."

Crystal hates scaring the children. She doesn't believe in hell. She wants to stop watching and touching, but every afternoon that she is at the day care center Crystal is drawn to the bathroom with the children. Her mind wanders to other ways to examine the small, vulnerable bodies.

That evening Mom and Tony have Manhattans before dinner, and a bottle of red with the pot roast. Knowing that after dinner cocktails are bound to follow, Crystal excuses herself, and hurries to the sanctuary of her room. She rereads her journal entries from the past few days. She imagines the events of today. A short while later, there is a crash in the living room. Crystal's stomach muscles tense. Mom is crying. It sounds like she is throwing up in the kitchen sink. Crystal hears her move from the kitchen to the living room. Soon the house is quiet.

Crystal takes off the headlamp and hides it, the pen, and the journal in the drawer. The bedroom door opens. Tony sticks his head in the room and it is a dark silhouette against the bright light in the hall. Tony has no features; there are no eyes, no nose, no mouth, just a voice, blurry and pleading. "Hey, pumpkin, are you still awake? Sorry if we woke you. Your mom had a little too much to drink, but she'll be fine in the morning."

Tony steps into the room. "Hey, sweetheart, how about if I rock you back to sleep? Wouldn't you like that?"

Tony pulls the covers back off the bed, and sits on the edge. Crystal shivers in her t-shirt and flannel pajamas. "Come here, honey, sit on my lap."

Crystal hesitates. Tony grabs her right arm. His voice is harder, sharper. "Come here, honey, and sit on my lap."

Crystal sits up in bed and moves to position herself on Tony's lap, wrapping her legs around his waist. Tony places his hand on the back of her head and pulls it against his chest. Between her legs, Crystal feels a hard bone pressing into her belly. Tony starts rocking Crystal back and forth, singing all the while. "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine."

"Come on, honey, sing it with me." The words choke in the back of Crystal's throat. "Hide it under a bushel, no, I'm going to let it shine."

Tony is rocking faster. "Don't let Satan blow it out. I'm going to let it shine." The pressure on Crystal's belly increases, and then in an instant Tony stops rocking and he pushes Crystal off of him. "Go on, get some sleep now. You've got school in the morning."

Tony leaves the room and closes the bedroom door. Crystal is alone in the dark. Her t-shirt is cold and sticky. She takes it off over her head and is careful not to touch Tony's mess. She rolls the shirt into a ball and stuffs it into the wicker clothes hamper next to the door. She goes over to her dresser, and opens the top left-hand drawer. A cool breeze finds its way beneath the window curtain and caresses Crystal's face. She pulls out an identical t-shirt, puts it on over her head, and walks back to her bed. She grabs the covers and shakes them hard.

Crystal fluffs her pillow and gets back into bed. She reaches over to the side table and pulls out the headlamp, the pen, and the journal. This time she does not make a tent with her bedcovers. She is sleeping under the open stars. She's ready for any lions or tigers that might come calling.

*The harrier flew higher and higher, and the quiet mouse looked down on the world below. I could tell he thought flying was exciting, but I also knew that he wanted to be back on the ground with his friends. I felt sorry for the striped mouse and I didn't want the harrier to eat him. So I called out to the harrier, "Oh, great bird, thank you for giving the mouse*

*such a lovely ride. Would you give one to me, too?" The harrier swooped down to hear what I was saying. When he came closer I asked if he would join me for dinner. He agreed and he dropped the small mouse from his talons. The bushmen had prepared antelope for us, and I gave the harrier a leg bone. He tore the meat off with his sharp beak. He broke it open and sucked out all the marrow. Nothing was left. I watched him destroy the bone as I drank my cocktail and I was happy.*