

Sari Fordham

THE MOUNTAIN LIONS OF WATAMU

I had malaria, and time was on a loop. The fan above the bed wobbled round and round and round, and the crack on the ceiling looked like an acacia tree or a thin man holding out his arms, depending on how I squinted. My mother had used a cement block to prop open the door of the guesthouse—“Let’s get some fresh air in here”—and for the first time in a week, I could hear the turning of the Indian Ocean and the clack of coconut fronds. I was eight, though in my memories I feel older. The air smelled of limes, seaweed, and millipedes, and beside my bed, I had lined up the mangrove seeds my sister Sonja had brought me and the shells I had collected before the fever. Every half-second, the fan quivered.

I watched the blades turn and worried about mountain lions. My growing anxiety felt like a warning. My mother had slipped down to the beach, to where Sonja and my father were swimming. I could see the cougar, standing on the bluff above them, flicking its tail. I could see Sonja running out of the ocean, laughing, and my parents watching her, their backs turned. They would never expect a mountain lion.

We were a missionary family, living at the time in Kenya. I had spent nearly my whole life in East Africa and knew there were no mountain lions here. If a visitor from the States had suggested it, I would have laughed, and then I would have gleefully told them about the animals that were, in fact, here and all the ways they could kill you. Even the vegetarian hippopotamus was dangerous. I knew about a boy who had been bitten by a hippo and had bled to death before reaching the hospital.

In the evenings, when the generator cut out and candles flickered on the table, my parents passed worries back and forth, their voices rarely lowered. “Did you hear?” my father or mother would say, and then the most terrible things would fall out of their mouths. Idi Amin’s soldiers had slaughtered everyone in a village near the border. A girl was bitten by a mamba, right in front of the clinic, and died before she hit the ground. My friend Brandon had black water malaria and “it didn’t look good.”

For weeks, my parents spoke about Brandon's health; when he left the hospital, they took me to visit. "You're the best medicine," his mother said, and my ears burned with pride and embarrassment. The whole apartment smelled like malaria, a sour, familiar smell. As Brandon slept, I sat on the floor and drew a savannah, putting zebras on one end of the paper and lions on the other. In the middle, I drew a tent with a boy standing beside it, smiling.

Things I wasn't afraid of: malaria, rabies, blood poisoning, military checkpoints, riptides, dog bites, bats, driver ants, hippos, African lions, and crocodiles.

Things I was afraid of: mountain lions and house fires.

The list was as short as it was arbitrary, and so I told no one.

Once, I think it was in December, I began to dream about fires. Each night, my subconscious picked up the narrative thread from the previous evening. Always, our house was burning, and always we were trying to escape in novel and futile ways. By morning, the world was again safe. We ate papaya and uji, and Sonja and I speculated about how many babies my beloved guinea pig was going to have. With the day stretched before me, my fears felt absurd, but by supper, dread descended. I followed my mother through the house, engaging her in cryptic conversations. I wanted her to say, without any direct provocation, *Guess what, kiddo? Our house isn't going to burn down tonight.* Instead, she grew exasperated. "What is it?" she asked. "Can't you just spit it out?" I couldn't.

Now, I needed someone to tell me that there were no mountain lions in Watamu. My brain, cool and indifferent, had already established this fact: *There are no mountain lions in all of Kenya.* But my imagination was cinematic. I could hear Sonja laughing, and with each loop of the fan, I could see the cougar inching closer to my family. I took short breaths—*Dear Jesus, Dear Jesus, Dear Jesus*—and leaned over to rearrange the shells and mangrove seeds, trying to ground myself with their lacquered surfaces. My mother would soon be back, and her presence would settle the matter. But she wasn't back. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Fear whispered in my ear. I swung my feet off the bed and lurched for the doorframe. *To do what?* Even with a malarial fever, I knew I couldn't stop a mauling. I went because I both trusted and didn't trust myself. I went because geographical facts weren't enough; I needed to see.

I don't remember walking to the bluff or whether the sand was still hot. What I remember is sitting at the top of the stairs and watching my family—

my mother reading a novel, my father and sister jumping in the waves—their laughter bouncing toward me. Eventually, they gathered their towels and books and walked up the path, waving as they neared. “Someone’s feeling better,” my father said.

Awash in relief, I nodded.

Thirty-five years later, and my daughter Kai is afraid of wolves, the villains of so many storybooks. She is five and too open to hide her fear from my husband, Bryan, and me. “There are no wolves in California,” Bryan tells her and shows her an atlas. I tell her wolves don’t attack people. “It’s just in stories,” I say. “In real life, wolves are really cool, like dogs.” Bryan shows her YouTube videos of the wolf pack in Yellowstone. She is momentarily charmed, but as soon as the lights are out, she calls to us, “But I’m still scared of wolves.”

I walk into her room. She’s wearing her favorite polar bear jammies, her hair damp from her bath. Her hands are stretched toward me, fingers splayed, and I gather her into my arms. “You give the plumpest hugs,” she says.

I try another tactic. “The only way a wolf could get into our house is through the dog door and how little is that? What kind of wolf would fit?”

“A baby wolf,” she says.

“Would it lick you?” I ask. She gathers the imaginary pup in her arms and presses it against her face, and I’m pleased with my creative solution. You just need to know your child.

“But mommy,” she says, “if there is a baby wolf, there is also a mommy wolf. And now it’s angry.”

We live in Riverside: mountain lion habitat. On hikes we often see a triangle yellow sign at the trailhead warning of their presence. Recently, a woman walked into her garage and found a mountain lion sitting there. Recently, a mountain lion attacked and killed a horse. A miniature one, but still. I’m relieved that all this mountain lion news isn’t reviving my childhood fears. We take Kai on hikes, and she takes Captain Barnacles, a stuffed polar bear from the cartoon *Octonauts*. Kai either drags behind us, complaining about her aching knees and immense boredom, or she dashes before us, the sky big and blue. When she gets too far away, we call her back, a lackadaisical holler. We aren’t unreasonably worried about cougars, but we aren’t reckless either.

“Why don’t you want me running ahead?” Kai says, trotting toward us, The Capt’n—as Bryan and I call him—stuffed into the front of her shirt. She knows full well why we have called her, but is waiting for our confirmation, for the delicious shiver that danger will add to our hike. She wants this fear.

In preschool, she has learned about earthquakes. We talk about our family plan, how we will climb into the bathtub or get under my rickety desk or stand in the doorframe leading into the hall. Each time, our plan shifts, like we’re flicking the spinner in a game called “Yikes!” After Bryan and I have reviewed our non-plan, Kai says, “Tell me something *else* dangerous.”

She is trying to piece together this world she inhabits, the things we’re not telling her. She doesn’t overhear her parents discussing genocide at the dining table. She lives in an old house that we have painted bright teal. In the spring, we go out into the garden where she eats peas, and then she gathers flowers and mud for her various soup projects. She dashes from one thing to another, the Capt’n dangling from her hand. She calls our dog, and the three of them are off to the far corner of the yard. I squat by the vegetable beds, yanking weeds.

When Kai brings me roly-polys, I look down at the lid she has collected them on. They’re curled up, protesting her small, determined fingers. “They’re going to be happier in the ground,” I say. “We should really let them go soon.” She decides they need a fancy house and returns to where she has found them, a patch of mud under the orange tree. Her decorating project should keep her busy, I think, giving me time to make a dent in the weedy patch of spotted spurge, but sooner than I would like, she is beside me again.

“I’m finished,” she says. I stand and stretch. Kai is holding the Capt’n. “The roly-polys might really like their new home,” she says. “I told them, ‘you need to cherish your habitat.’” I smile at the way she parrots us. “Come and see, Mommy.” We hold hands and walk through the yard.

The mud is lined with stones and shells and feathers, and she has tossed petals—including from flowers we’ve told her not to pick—over the whole thing. The roly-polys, released into their new habitat, have wisely scattered. “Very fancy,” I say. The orange blossoms smell sweet, and the buzzing of bees settles over the afternoon like a distant lawnmower.

The wolves of night feel far away.

News agencies have begun to more urgently report on climate change, the melting glaciers, the collapse of insect populations, the extinction of animals. With sorrow, I read that giraffes are now on the endangered species list. They were a childhood favorite, those creatures that moved across the savannah in elegant lurches like ships crossing the sea. Sometimes, my family would come upon giraffes eating close to the road. My father would cut the engine, and we would watch their long, black tongues wrapping around acacia leaves and pulling the foliage into their mouths. In my lifetime, Kenya's giraffe population has dropped in half.

After Kai is asleep, I sit with my laptop on my knees and read yet another alarming report that I don't want to know. I ask Bryan what he thinks about it all. Bryan is smart, science-minded, even-keeled, and honest. He is the person I trust most to give me an objective answer. "It's terrifying," he says.

Bryan and I join an environmental advocacy organization, and a month later, we have our first opportunity to be activists. The group will visit our representative Mark Takano and will thank him for supporting The Green New Deal. We'll also urge him to be more vocal about environmental protections. Bryan is at work during the scheduled meeting, but I am done teaching for the day. I pack a bag of snacks for Kai and tell her that we're going to meet our congressperson and ask him to take better care of the world and to let him know that animals are important to us. Kai is big on animals. She even likes wolves during the day. Polar bears like *The Captn'*, though, are her favorite, and Kai has spent the past several months learning as much as she can about the real ones and telling us that when she grows up, she wants to live in the Arctic and study them. She will be a scientist-ballerina-artist-jumper, and she will own forty-two dogs and three kittens. The future she imagines is filled with wonder and possibilities.

Takano is in Washington on the day we visit, and so we talk with his staff. Our group includes a college student who has been to this office many times, several mothers who have also brought their children, a quiet man holding wooden prayer beads, and a retired teacher who describes marching in the 60's. "I don't want to keep doing this," she says, "but I will." When it's my turn to speak, I tell Takano's staff that polar bear habitat is important to my daughter and that her habitat is important to me. As I talk about my fears for her future, I start to cry and am horrified. Kai looks up at me, a little owl wondering, *What is this?* She is depending on me to keep her safe.

When I was a child, I trusted in the magic and power of adulthood. I knew that the world was a perilous place, and I expected adults in all their boring wisdom to help me navigate it. They told us what we had to do, their voices ringing with certainty, and if we asked *why*, they replied, *Because I said so*. I was an argumentative child, prone to litigating rules and punishments, but when my mother resorted to *Because I said so*, the deepest part of me respected her logic. My parents were the final authority. Their declarations came from the secret world of adults.

Now, I'm the adult and the secret—that there is no secret—is terrifying. If anything, we lose confidence as we age. We doubt. Our fears become less interesting and our responses more tentative. We know there are hundreds of ways to do something wrong and about as many to do them right; it can be years before we know which is which. Life is complex, and we have lost our belief that one person or even one nation can successfully confront the multifaceted challenges we face, and so we use words like “multifaceted” and “challenges” to create distance between ourselves and catastrophe. We know too much. We're too cynical. We've lost our idealism.

At the same time, we also manage to know too little. We're afraid of the mountain lions of Watamu. Our bodies tell us *careful, careful, careful* about statistically insignificant threats. Our fears are cinematic, shaped by procedural dramas and by the warnings of our aunts (“I once heard of a young girl . . .”) and by the rivers of violence and scarcity that have flowed through human history. We buy cameras for our doors. We log onto neighborhood websites and describe the homeless men sorting through recycling bins.

Meanwhile, scientists are trying to draw our attention to the existential crisis of climate change. They tell us that everything that makes life convenient is also threatening our children's future. Our economy is built on fossil fuels, and as the economy expands, our atmosphere warms and the sea ice melts. And if that weren't enough, we're also overfishing the oceans, slashing the rainforests, and poisoning insects. Meanwhile, we build larger and larger homes. Meanwhile, we travel more widely.

I believe in parenting honestly, but I'm vague about climate change. Existential crisis feels too heavy for me to carry and certainly not something to hand to my child. And so we focus as a family on solutions to the unnamed problem. We pick up plastic bags flying around the parking lot, grow bee- and butterfly-friendly plants, install solar panels on our roof, compost food scraps,

donate to environmental causes, and attend protest marches. At night, before tucking Kai into bed, I pray that our family will be good stewards of creation. I hope action will be an antidote to fear.

I feel okay about my response, until I assign Roy Scranton's *New York Times* opinion piece, "Raising My Child in a Doomed World," to one of the classes I'm teaching. I ask my students to observe how he creates emotional resolution from an impossible topic. Early in his essay, he sets up the problem: "Barring a miracle, the next 20 years are going to see increasingly chaotic systemic transformation in global climate patterns, unpredictable biological adaptation and a wild spectrum of human political and economic responses, including scapegoating and war. After that, things will get worse." His solution, not for climate change but for raising his daughter, is to teach her to live ethically.

My students arrive in class furious. "Shouldn't he be teaching his daughter that anyway?" one student asks. "Why does he only have all these questions after she's born?" another says. "It's not fair." A third nods and flicks through the essay. "Yeah. I decided not to have kids after reading this."

I'm taken aback by their anger. Scranton is one of the good guys sounding the alarm. What else can he realistically do? What can any of us do? I decide that maybe my students aren't really angry at anyone; maybe they're just anxious. We agree to plant a tree on campus, which I'm enthusiastic about until my emails requesting approval are unanswered and no one picks up my calls. I don't follow up further. The quarter ends, and I plant a tree in the class's name through Cool Earth, an environmental NGO. I am one more adult defeated by red tape and relying on the most convenient solution.

It takes me months of following young climate activists on Twitter to understand that it's all related—my good intentions and Scranton's. My students are no doubt as furious as they appeared. They have heard about climate change their entire lives. The first climate conference was in 1979, and since then, adults have gathered again and again to make realistic plans, even as more carbon accumulates in the atmosphere. It's all so desperate, and most of us adults continue with our lives, trying not to think about the dystopian landscape our children will inherit. We do not have language for this sort of horror, and many of us still don't even believe it's real. The children must save themselves.

In Uganda, a teen holds up a sign that reads, "Do we realize we can't

breathe money?” Her image appears on my Twitter feed between literary news and cute cat photos. Because I have lived in Kampala, I stop at the picture and look at it closely. A young man is holding a sign that reads “Climate Emergency Now.” Whoever made the sign has written each word in a different color, and I find myself moved by such hopeful artistry. The Ugandan group is small, but they’re joined virtually by students in Ghana, in England, in India, in the United States, in Argentina. I follow them all on Twitter. Their leader is Greta Thunberg, a sixteen-year-old Swede who often wears her hair in braids and who speaks with the clarity of a prophet.

In a 2019 speech in Davos, she tells the rich and the powerful, “You say nothing in life is black or white but that is a lie, a very dangerous lie. Either we prevent a 1.5 degree of warming or we don’t.” I listen to Greta’s speech on my computer, and I wipe at my eyes.

She’s a small thing, sitting in a gray chair and clutching her notes. If she’s nervous, her voice doesn’t waver, and when I listen to her speech again, it’s exasperation I hear. I imagine the sweet and glossy words adults must sing to her after she has spoken.

What a wonderful speech. You’re a very determined young lady.

With kids like you, the future is really bright.

Hope is so important. Don’t let anyone take that away from you.

She hasn’t come for polite niceties. Her speeches are aimed at those who believe the science in general but aren’t appropriately anxious. They legislate and act in sensible increments. They speak the language of optimism. “I don’t want your hope,” she tells them, and, really, she is talking to all of us adults. “I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire. Because it is.”

I want a tangible way to help, and so I decide to take Kai on our own two-person climate strike. I feel both determined and silly. On Friday morning, half a year after I taught Roy Scranton’s essay, I make myself coffee. I can hear the mockingbirds singing in our orange trees, and when I sit down with a cup, I can see the butterflies flitting through our garden. Kai asks if I will turn on a show.

“We’re climate striking today, remember?” I tell her, though the world

feels serene and beautiful, and there are surely other, more practical ways, to protect it. Sitting in downtown Riverside with signs that say, in essence, *The End Is Near*, is not something I want to do.

“What is climate striking?” Kai asks.

“Well, we’ll make signs and we’ll tell people that the natural world is important,” I say.

“Okay,” Kai says. “Come on, Mommy. Get up. Let’s make signs.”

In the garage, I look through the cardboard Amazon boxes stacked against the wall, as Kai gathers some toys that we have rotated out of her room. When I choose the largest box, she follows me back into the house, dropping her toys into her room and returning with ribbons and glue. We work on her sign first. I write down her slogan: “I love polar bears. Please protect their habitat.” She then wants to include a long sentence about all the toys she is hoping to receive for Christmas, but it feels like too much honesty for one sign and besides, there isn’t enough space. Later, I will appreciate how succinctly she has captured humanity’s dilemma. We want to have both a booming economy and a healthy ecosystem. We make climate change signs out of Amazon boxes. There is no better metaphor.

“How about, ‘P.S. I love toys, too?’” I say.

“Okay,” she says, no longer interested in the message. She glues on ribbons and scraps of paper while I write my own signs.

It’s hot when we finally park downtown and find a bench to sit on. There’s a homeless man on the next bench over, and he’s talking urgently to someone or something, reminding me that California has other immediate problems. Why am I focused on this one? Kai holds up her sign when the first group walks past, and they read it and coo over her cuteness. After five minutes, she is bored. I have prepared for this. I bring out her snacks and a book from the library. For the rest of our climate strike, I read *Captain Pug* aloud and try to keep our signs from falling over. I’m underwhelmed by my efforts. Surely, this is not the ethical conclusion my students or Greta had in mind.

In the middle of the night, Kai calls again, and I pull myself out of bed to go to her. “I’m scared of wolves. I want to go to your bed,” she says, wrapping her limbs around me. I carry her into our room, and Bryan instinctively makes space for her. I press my nose into Kai’s cheek. She’s our purchase on the

future, a representation of what's at stake.

I wish I could be more certain about humanity's collective willpower. Some days I am. When there is a global climate strike in September, our whole family attends. Kai has brought a basket, and as we march and chant, she scurries to pick up trash. I can feel the collective energy, and it feels like hope. Other days, I'm less certain. On these days, hope feels false. I turn away from the news and follow my daughter out to the orange trees. She is learning to climb one of them and has managed to hoist herself up nearly half a foot. She is scared of height, and I know what even that six inches is costing her in effort and bravery. She hangs on to a low bough with both arms and splays her feet between the split trunk. "Look at me, Mommy," she says. "I'm climbing good, aren't I?"

"You really are," I say, and for today, it is all I know how to say.