

## **“Night Calls” by Lisa Fugard**

My father's hands were huge. Slablike. When he was idle they seemed to hang off the ends of his arms like two chunks of meat. He sat on his hands during the months he courted my mother. When I was 13 I watched my thin hand disappear into his. It was at the train station at Modder River. I'd come home for the September holidays. It was hot, and the only other car at the small station pulled away. The siding at Modder River, 150 miles north of Johannesburg, was never busy. I remember it all clearly, standing in the dust, watching him get out of the truck and walk toward me, noticing that there was no smile on his face but still feeling my body move toward him, my arms opening for an embrace, something rising in my throat. My father stopped and held out his right hand.

Once in the truck I was filled with anxiety about how close to him I could sit. I settled in the middle of my half of the bench seat and watched his large, brown hand move from the steering wheel to the gearshift and back. I breathed deeply. Suddenly I was filled with the smell of him: Borkum Riff tobacco, sweat, the sweet odor of cheap Cape brandy. Filled with his secrets, I felt like a thief and moved a little closer to the window.

Then we were at the entrance to the Modder River Wildlife Sanctuary, and I jumped out of the car to open the gate. It swung easily, once I unlatched it, and banged against the wooden fence post, startling several guinea fowl that scampered into the veld. "Krrdll...krrdll...krrdll," I called, and they slowed down. I mimicked their rattling cry again, and they stopped. Again, and a few of them stepped hesitantly toward me. Laughing, I turned to find my father's smile, but his face was gone, blotted out by the expanse of blue sky reflected in the windshield.

I have a gift for mimicking bird and animal calls. During my third year at boarding school I'd finally made myself popular and gained the respect of Wendy Venter, the bully of our dorm, by doing several calls late one night. It became a ritual, and every couple of weeks, around midnight, I'd hear rustling and whispering from the 11 other girls in the dormitory; then a balled-up sock would land on my bed, usually right next to my head, and Wendy would call my name in a sly whisper, "Marlene." The dorm would fall silent. Lying back in the darkness I'd start with the deep moan of the spotted eagle owl; then the high-pitched yip of the black-backed jackal; the low snuffle and violent laugh of the hyena; and then a deadly combination: the rasping, half-swallowed growl of the leopard, followed by the wild scream of the chacma baboon. Inevitably one of the younger girls would begin to cry, and I'd hear Wendy snickering in the darkness.

I'd told my father about this during my next trip home, about how much the other girls had enjoyed it, and I offered to do it for him one evening, offered to steal into his room at midnight, crouch at the foot of his bed, and make the calls for him. He'd shaken his head ever so slightly. "I've got the real thing right outside my window," he said.

As we drove up to our house now I noticed the shabby state of the compound. The road was rutted and washed-out in many places by the spring rains. The visitors' kiosk was boarded up, and the map of the sanctuary had been knocked off its post and lay on the ground. Even the pond had been neglected. When my parents had first come to Modder River, five years before I was born, my father had had the pond dug out for my mother. An avid botanist, she'd planted it with indigenous water lilies that she collected, along with bulrushes, seven-weeks ferns, and floating hearts. During the two years when the Modder River was reduced to a trickle by the drought, the local farmers had been astonished to hear that my father was actually pumping precious water from our bore-hole into the pond to prevent it from drying up. An opulent jewel in the dusty, cracked landscape, it became a haven for birds, being visited by pied kingfishers, mountain chats, spoonbills, bokmakieries, a pair of black-shouldered kites--all told, my mother counted 107 different species. Now a thick layer of brown scum covered the shallow, stagnant water. I remembered a letter that I'd received from my father several months before. The scrawled handwriting hadn't even looked like his. I'd read it once and then hidden it away, scared by the loneliness that the words hinted at.

None of this seemed to matter, however, when I stood among our dogs, being pelted with paws and tails and long pink tongues: King, with his tail plumed like an ostrich feather, and Blitz, a lean, black shadow. They clattered behind me as I went into my bedroom. The room was still and dark and smelled musty. Quickly I opened the wooden shutters. I moved to the chest of drawers and found the large framed photograph of my mother, frozen at age 32. She was laughing, and her head was turned slightly as a lock of hair blew across her face. I traced her jaw line with my finger and moved to the mirror with the photograph, but the dogs were demanding, barking and pawing at my legs.

I ran outside with them and chased them up and down the cool stone lengths of the veranda, flying past the living room and the dining room, screeching past my father's study and back again with the dogs racing behind me. Back and forth I went, until the force of motion made me round the corner past my parents' old bedroom. I stopped, panting, trying to catch my breath. I stared at the large fenced-in area under the blue gum tree. It was where my father kept the red-crested night heron, one of the last of its kind.

The year that the park officials brought the bird to Modder River had been a difficult one. My mother was killed in a car accident just before my eighth birthday. Numbly, I watched my father make funeral arrangements with the help of his sister, Annette, who drove up from Johannesburg. She was adamant: There was no way I could stay at Modder River. It was too remote, and there was my schooling to consider; my mother had been my tutor. As for my father, it made no sense for him to remain, grieving, in a place so closely associated with his wife. My father was on the verge of resigning as warden of the small sanctuary when park officials telephoned about the bird. The red-crested night heron had been captured at the vlei on Nie Te Ver, the farm abutting the sanctuary's eastern border, and the National

Parks Board wanted the heron kept at Modder River on the slim chance that they might find a mate for it. A Mr. Vanjaarsveld arrived with the bird. "We had to tie the bugger's beak up, otherwise he'd have cut us to ribbons," he said, as he placed a large burlap bag in the pen that my father had hastily constructed. He opened the bag and then quickly stepped out and shut the gate. A few moments of silence--then a wild flurry of wings, the sound of the air being thumped, and the heron hit the wire at the top of the pen and came crashing down. Again and again, till the bird lay in the dust exhausted, its wings useless. Quietly my father opened the gate and stepped inside the pen. For several minutes he squatted on his haunches in the corner and then slowly he inched his way toward the bird. Kneeling alongside it, he checked the feathers for damage, spreading the wings on the ground in front of him, like a fan. Then, making soft noises in the back of his throat, he untied the strip of burlap around the heron's beak. My father stayed on at Modder River, and arrangements were made for me to go to boarding school.

During holidays I came home, and my father would share the latest news about the heron with me. He showed me articles from the local papers lauding the conservation efforts surrounding the bird, as well as articles from foreign countries in languages we couldn't understand. He showed me the stamp that the South African government issued--a 37-cent stamp with the heron's lean profile and brilliant crest. And once he gave me a feather, a long, steel-gray feather from the tip of the heron's wing, a flight feather, and it was smooth as I stroked it against my cheek during the overnight train ride back to boarding school. But after two or three years, interest in the heron faded. The articles died down, and in private the National Parks Board expressed their doubts to my father that they would ever find a mate for the bird. The sanctuary was small, and apart from a secretive leopard we didn't have any of the Big Five--animals like elephants and lions that attracted tourists. Modder River returned to the way it used to be, a trickle of visitors on the occasional weekend.

I stared at the pen for a long time now. I knew what was in there. A large gray bird, with ugly hooked feet, a long slithery neck that gave me nightmares, and a red crest that was raised during the courtship ritual. I had never seen the crest, but once I'd caught a glimpse of a small red feather that had escaped from the heron's crown. There was no need to walk through the dust to look at the bird under the swaying blue gum tree branches. I went anyway. Effortlessly, I climbed the blue gum tree, but now it was difficult for me to squeeze into the small fork halfway up. The heron pecked listlessly at a dried-out fish, and I noticed that the pen hadn't been cleaned in quite a while. I'd spent many school holidays in the tree watching my father as he fed the bird, collected the feathers during the molt, and proudly chatted with visitors. Maybe he'd known that I was up there all the time.

I shivered. The sun had set, taking all the warmth with it, and a thin veil of light pressed against our house and the Modder River as it crawled like a fat brown snake out of the mountains.

Walking back down the length of the veranda, I peered through the windows of the rooms we'd stopped using, the dining room with its yellow wood table, the living room where my mother's desk was still piled high with the field guides and books she'd used to identify unknown plants she'd come across. The outside light flickered on, and I found my father in the kitchen, heating up a tin of curry. We ate our dinner in silence, and then he read a book and I listened to the radio. I felt uncomfortable in the house and longed for the morning, when I could go racing through the veld with the dogs, go out looking for tracks and walk far into the sanctuary. At 10 P.M., as was custom, my father switched off the electricity generator and went to his study, where he slept.

The low hum now gone, I lay in bed and let the night overtake me, hungrily following the calls in the darkness. A jackal marking his territory, the rhythmic eruptions of spring bullfrogs, the steady breath of King at the foot of my bed. And then I heard another familiar sound, the creaking of the gate on the heron's pen. Gently I felt my way down the hall and into my parents' old bedroom. I hid behind the soft lace curtains, and as my eyes grew accustomed to the night I saw my father move slowly across the compound carrying the heron gently under his arm, its long legs dangling at his side. The heron's neck was liquid in the moonlight, curving and swaying, at times seeming to entwine my father. Its beak glinted like a dagger. One of my father's hands followed the bird's neck, lightly touching it at times, while the other was sunk deep into the heron's soft breast, pale gray feathers around his wrist. My father slipped by with the heron, and I went back to bed and stared into the darkness. Later on I heard a tremulous wail repeated several times. It came from the river. I knew it was the red-crested night heron, even though I'd never heard its call before, and I thought about my father in the darkness on the banks of the Modder River with the bird.

At breakfast the next morning my father told me that a hyena had gotten the best of us, had finally broken into the heron's pen, because the bird had disappeared. Under the blue gum tree we examined a huge hole in the fence. "Yes, I think so, Dad," I said, and nodded in agreement as we watched King and Blitz sniff inside the pen. He seemed lighter and chatted with me about school as I helped him dismantle the fence. "Hyena," he had said with such authority. He told me that now he might even be able to come to the end-of-the-year recital at my school. That night I made fried bananas and ice cream for dessert, and we listened to a radio play together. At ten, just before he switched off the generator, I looked in the mirror and thought, I have his eyes.

In bed, in the blackness, I listened to the night again. The jackal that had been barking the previous night had moved on, and it seemed quiet out there. It wasn't long before I heard the heron calling. I knew my father heard it as well, and I tried to picture him in his bed. I wondered if his heart beat like mine, an urgent knocking in my chest. I rolled over and thought of the red-crested night heron, alone by the river, the last of its kind, and I imagined that its crest was raised and that it picked its way delicately through the muddy water, lifting its feet up like wet handkerchiefs.

The following night I heard the heron's call again, and I also heard footsteps leaving our house. I knew it was my father going down to the river. For ten nights the heron called and my father followed. During the days we worked on repairing things around the compound. We cleaned up the pond and made a day trip to the western corner of the sanctuary, where the Modder River dropped abruptly into a densely forested ravine-- gnarled trees hung with a thick gray moss that I called "old man's beard." We collected water lilies from the dappled pools, wrapping their roots in damp newspaper and placing them in our packs. Baboons barked from the rocky ledges. We saw the spoor of the leopard, two pug marks in the rich black mud. For the drive home I sat in the back of the truck. As my father shifted to low gear and negotiated the sandy part of the road that ran alongside the river, I scanned the banks, hoping to catch a glimpse of the heron roosting, waiting for nightfall. I spent a day repairing the signs along the Succulent Trail, a one-mile loop that wound through an area that my father had filled with rare plants--aloe albida, aloe monotropa, a lydenberg cycad. We put the map back on its post and touched it up with small pots of paint, the Modder River a blue vein in the brown landscape.

Then, one long night, I didn't hear the heron's call. The bird had disappeared, and when I got out of bed the next morning I saw that my father's eyes had gone dull like a dead animal's. I knew why but couldn't say anything. Then he started walking all the time, often coming home only for an hour or two in the early dawn. I'd hear the creak of the floorboards near the kitchen and the thud of Blitz's tail on the floor. I'd hear my father pacing, and then, eventually, stillness. He's lying on the sofa in his study, he's asleep now, I'd say to myself. Then the pacing again and the soft slam of the screen door. From the blue gum tree I'd see him crisscrossing the veld, like a rabid dog, always coming back to touch the river. Straining my eyes, I'd watch him walk farther and farther away, until he vanished into the landscape.

Accidentally, I found the heron's remains. I was out late one afternoon, looking for a snake skin for my next school biology project. I had chosen a rocky area, where I'd seen cobras and puff adders sunning themselves, and as I moved slowly through it, poking into crevices with a stick, I came across a broken fan of bloodied feathers. The steel-gray patina was unmistakable, and I knew it was part of the heron's wing. I scratched out a hole with my stick and buried the feathers, pushing a large rock over the small grave.

I made sandwiches for supper that night. I made extra ones for my father, but he didn't come home. I sat on the veranda with King and Blitz until ten o'clock, when I switched off the generator. Swiftly, silently, I followed the footpath down to the far bank of the river, pushing my way through the warm water that came up to my waist. I hid in the reeds and waited.

An hour later I saw my father on the opposite bank, looking, listening. He sat down on the dark sand and rolled a pebble in his large palms. I crouched even lower. Slowly I tilted my head back until my throat was wide open and a tremulous wail slid out. My father stood up and looked across the water to where I was crouched. Again I made the sound, again and again. He took three more small steps toward my side of the river and his hands fluttered like giant, tawny moths in the moonlight.