

BY MERI NANA-AMA DANQUAH

Definitions of authenticity

In several areas of the artists' colony, the woods were especially thick and populated with deer, snakes and Lyme Disease-spreading ticks. However, the stretch of land between the library and my studio was not one of them. But it was late, dark as a cave, so I asked the young playwright, a slender dreadlocked Chicago man, to walk with me.

In America, it's said that the craziest of the crazies live in the country: greasy-haired, irreversibly damaged white men with beer bellies and bad teeth who wield axes or chainsaws. For them, the kill is only part of the fun. They torture, skin, dismember or eat their victims. I hugged my laptop to my chest and walked briskly.

"I'm surprised you're so scared," the playwright said. "I'd think, living in Africa and all, you'd be used to walking through woods at night hearing animals."

It was the blow of that comment which landed me on a plane to Kenya. Household pets, cows and goats aside, the only wildlife I'd ever seen was at the National Zoo in Washington, DC. Maybe the playwright had a point: what kind of African was I?

On day one, while at a Nairobi hotel's garden café, eating a chicken sandwich instead of *nyama choma* with *ugali* and *kachumbari*, I spotted a Maasai man in traditional attire: beaded jewellery in his earlobes, around his neck, wrists and waist, a spear strapped to the red smock around which he'd wrapped his sinewy body. He looked like he'd just stepped out of the Serengeti, the skin on his shaved head and legs ink-black and slick. He was seated with a 'ginger'. Imagine, if you can, Little Orphan Annie as

a quinquagenarian, curly-haired and wide-eyed. Their body language suggested a formality and hesitation common to the newly acquainted.

Day after day, night after night, I saw them there.

Over cocktails one evening, I said to my friend, a journalist, "I wonder what *they're* doing together?"

"Probably a case study," she said with certainty. "Maasai men are supposedly quite well-endowed." If the spear were to be removed, I wondered, the *kikoi* cloth unravelled and the red cloak opened, what magic might I find?

Earlier that day, I'd gone on a game drive and seen zebras, buffalo, impalas and lions, and looked up into that legendary azure sky. I felt, briefly, like a *real* African; then, almost immediately, I went back to feeling like myself.

Once we confront the mythologies in which our lives are so often mired, what else can any of us be but ourselves? As beauty is for the beholder, the definitions of authenticity are for the believers – the writer who thinks all white yokels are serial killers, the playwright who imagines Africa as a Tarzan film set, the journalist whose job is predicated on judgement and the suburban woman who stalks peace in the company of a Maasai warrior. ●

Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, who is based in Ghana, is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression*. She is currently writing a travelogue.



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