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opening extract from

The White Giraffe

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Lauren St John

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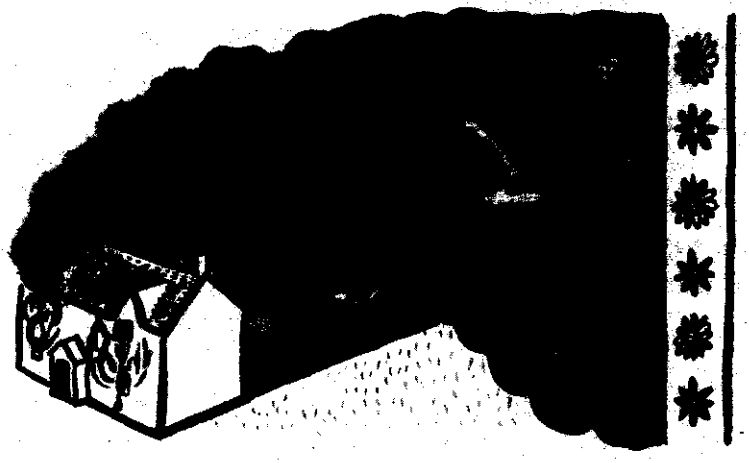
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People like to say that things come in threes, but the way Martine looked at it that all depends on when you start counting and when you stop. For instance, she could say that one bad thing happened along with three good things, but the truth was that the one bad thing was the very worst thing in the whole world, another was so small she didn't really notice it at the time, and something else that she first thought was bad luck later turned out to be the best kind of fortune anyone could wish for. Whichever way you added it up, though, one thing was certain. The night Martine Allen turned eleven years old was the

night her life changed absolutely, totally and completely and was never the same again.

It was New Year's Eve. At the time, Martine was asleep in bed and she was dreaming about a place she'd never been to before, and the reason she was so positive was because it was too beautiful ever to forget. As far as the eye could see there were lawns lined with exotic flowers and trees. Behind them, rising into a clear sky, was a mountain made majestic by granite cliffs and lush green forests. Children were laughing and chasing moths through beds of dusky-pink flowers and, in the distance, Martine could hear drums and soaring voices. But for some reason she felt apprehensive. Dread prickled her skin.

All at once, the sky began to boil with a turbulent violet light and a thick tablecloth of steel-grey cloud raced down the mountain. The day turned from sunny to sinister in seconds. Then one of the children shouted, 'Hey, look what I found!'

It was a wild goose with a broken wing. But instead of helping it, some of the children began tormenting it. Martine, who could never bear to see any creature hurt, tried to stop them, but in the dream they turned on her instead. Next thing she knew she was on the ground crying and the injured bird was in her arms.

Then something very peculiar happened. Her hands, holding the wild goose, heated up to the point where they were practically glowing and electricity crackled through her. She saw, in a swirl of smoke, black men in horned antelope masks and rhinoceroses breathing fire,

and heard voices as old as Time. She knew they wanted to speak to her, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. Suddenly, the bird stirred. Martine opened her palms and it shook out its wings and flew into the violet sky.

In the dream, she looked up smiling, but the other children didn't smile back. They stared at her with a mixture of horror and disbelief. 'Witch!' they chanted, 'witch, witch, witch,' and they began to chase her. Martine fled sobbing up the mountain, into a dark forest. But her legs were unimaginably heavy, hooked thorns tore at her ankles and she was losing her way in the cloud. And all the while it was getting hotter and hotter. Then a hand grabbed her and she began to scream and scream and scream.



It was the sound of her own screams that finally woke Martine. She shot up in bed. It was pitch dark and it took a few seconds for her to realize she'd been asleep. None of it had happened. There was no mountain and no bird. She was safely in her bed in Hampshire, England, with her parents sleeping soundly across the corridor. Heart pounding, she sank back into the pillows. She was a bit dizzy and she still felt very, very hot.

Hot? How could it possibly be *hot*? It was midwinter. Martine's eyes flew open. Something was wrong. Frantically she fumbled for the bedside lamp, but for

some reason it wasn't working. She sat up again. An orange light was flickering beneath the bedroom door and grey ribbons of smoke were drifting up from it.

'Fire!' yelled Martine. 'Fire!'

She leapt out of bed, caught her foot in the blankets and crashed to the ground. Tears of panic sprang into her eyes. She wiped them away roughly. If I don't think clearly, she told herself, I'll never get out alive. The corner of the door turned molten red and broke away and a plume of smoke poured in after it. Martine began coughing violently. She clawed at the floor for yesterday's sweatshirt, discarded there when she put on her pyjamas. Almost cheering with thankfulness when she found it immediately, she tied it round her face. Then she scrambled to her feet, heaved up the window and leaned out into the starless night. What was she supposed to do? Jump?

Martine stood paralysed with terror. Far below her, the snow glinted mockingly in the darkness. Behind her, the room was filling with smoke and fumes and the fire was roaring like a factory furnace. It was blisteringly, murderously hot – so hot that she felt as if her pyjamas were melting off her back. The window was the only way out. Swinging her legs over the sill, she reached out and grabbed a clump of ivy. It was as wet as lettuce and came away in her hand. Martine almost toppled after it. She tried again, this time knocking away the packed snow and groping behind the vine for a pipe or a crevice or anything at all that would give her a handhold. Nothing!

Martine's eyes streamed. Moments remained between her and disaster, but she jumped back into the room, snatched the sheets off the bed and knotted them together, tying one end to the bed leg nearest the window. There was no time to test it. She just had to hope that it would hold. As fast as she dared, she climbed out of the window, clinging to the sheet-rope with both hands. She knew very well that it wouldn't reach the ground but it might get her a little closer.

She was still high in the air when her hands, stiff as fish fingers in the gusting Arctic wind, lost their grip and she crashed into the snow. Martine dragged herself upright, shivering, and hobbled along the side of the house to the front. She was soaked to the skin and one wrist was aching, but as soon as she rounded the corner, she no longer thought about that. She was too busy taking in the appalling scene before her. Her home was a raging inferno. Flames leapt in every window and coils of smoke billowed into the night sky. A crowd had gathered on the lawn and all along the street doors were opening and more people were rushing to join them. Sirens announced the rapid approach of the fire brigade.

'Mum! Dad!' yelled Martine, and she ran round the side for the front of the house.

Shocked faces turned in her direction. There was a collective gasp. The Allens' elderly next-door neighbour opened her mouth when she saw Martine rushing across the lawn but no sound came out. Mr and Mrs Morrison, who lived further up the street, were also rooted to the spot, but Mr Morrison, a burly former rugby player,

shook himself into action at the last moment and managed to catch Martine as she flew by.

'Let me go,' sobbed Martine, but even as she spoke she knew it was too late. The walls of the house were collapsing in a molten heap. Within minutes, there was nothing left. The fire brigade had arrived, but the most they could do was put the flames out.

Mrs Morrison put her arms around Martine and held her tightly. 'I'm so sorry, my dear,' she said. 'I'm so sorry.' Others came over to console her, and Mr Morrison gave her his coat to put on over her pyjamas.

Through the screen of Martine's tears, the still-glowing embers and bubbles of the firemen's foam shone like rubies and diamonds in the fading night. Only a few hours ago, she'd been enjoying a birthday dinner with her parents. They'd made pancakes and filled them with almonds, bananas and melted chocolate and shaped them into cones they could eat with their hands. Martine and her mum had laughed at her dad, David, who was talking so much that he hadn't noticed that his pancake was leaking chocolate down his shirt. Only one thing had happened that Martine now thought strange.

They'd been on their way up to bed. Martine's mum had kissed her and gone on ahead and Martine was walking up the stairs with her dad. When they reached her bedroom door, he hugged her goodnight, ruffled her hair and told her he loved her, just as he always did. But then he said something odd.

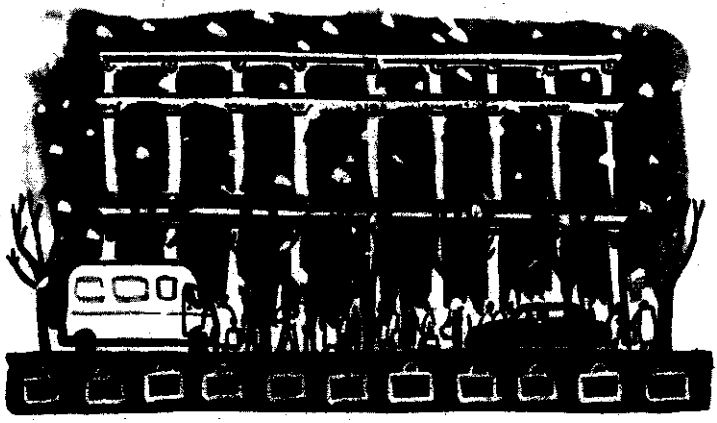
'You have to trust, Martine. Everything happens for a reason.'

And Martine had smiled at him and thought how lovely her parents were even if they were sometimes a little weird and she'd gone into her room, not knowing that they were the last words he would ever say to her.

Not knowing she would never see either of her parents again.



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It was Mr Grice from Social Services who told Martine that she would be moving to Africa. Cape Town, South Africa, to be precise.

'*South Africa!*' cried Martine. 'Why South Africa?'

'Well,' said Mr Grice, 'it seems that your only surviving relative is, in fact, living on a game reserve in South Africa. A Mrs Gwyn Thomas who, I'm told, is your grandmother.'

Martine was stunned. 'I don't have a grandmother,' she said slowly.

Mr Grice frowned. He reached into his pocket for his glasses and consulted his file again. 'No, I assure you

there's no mistake. I have her letter here.'

He handed Martine a sheet of cream writing paper.

Dear Mr Grice,

Thank you for your condolences on the sad loss of my daughter, Veronica Allen, and her husband, David, two of the finest people I have ever known. I was unaware that my daughter had stipulated that I should have guardianship of their child, Martine, if anything ever happened to her. However, I will accept the responsibility. It is the least I can do. I enclose an air ticket to Cape Town and £150 for the girl's expenses. I rarely go into the city and would be grateful if you could ensure that she is adequately clothed for the South African weather.

Yours truly, Gwyn Thomas.

There was something about the tone of the letter that bothered Martine. Her grandmother didn't seem at all enthusiastic about the prospect of taking her on. Quite the reverse. From the sound of things, she expected Martine to be a burden. She couldn't even face the prospect of buying her a few summer clothes. She had clearly adored Martine's parents, but that didn't mean she wanted to be stuck with Martine. And what about her grandfather? There was no mention of him.

Martine handed the letter back to Mr Grice. 'I'm not going,' she said. 'She doesn't want me and there's no way I'm going to live with somebody who doesn't want me. I'd rather stick pins in my eyes.'

Mr Grice looked at her in consternation. It had been a trying morning and he had a feeling that it was about to get worse. What was the matter with his supervisor that she was always giving him the difficult jobs?

'But Mrs Thomas is your legal guardian,' he tried.

'I'm not going,' Martine repeated stubbornly, 'and you can't make me.'

Mr Grice gathered his papers together in a messy bundle, knocking over a glass of water in the process. 'I'll be back,' he told Martine, ignoring the puddle and the ink turning to watercolour on his documents. 'I have to make a phone call.'

Martine sat staring at the smoke-stained wallpaper in Mr Grice's office feeling much more afraid than she'd let on. The past few weeks had passed in a blur. For the first nightmarish five days after the fire she'd stayed with the Morrisons, until their sons returned from a college rugby tour. Then she'd moved in with a friend of her mother's who was unable to cope with a grieving child. Finally, she was driven off to the house of Miss Rose, her English teacher, who was going to take care of her until her future was decided. Everywhere she went, people wore over-bright smiles and were full of helpful suggestions. But as soon as she left the room, she could hear hushed conversations in which the words 'orphan' and 'all alone in the world' were frequently used.

Martine was too dazed and heartbroken to care. Most of the time she walked around with a crashing sensation in her head, as if she was falling into a well with no bottom. She couldn't eat; she couldn't sleep; she couldn't

cry. The question she kept asking herself over and over was *why*? Why had she been saved and her parents hadn't? It seemed so unfair. The firemen had praised her bravery and told her she'd done the right thing. They said if she'd opened her door even a crack to try to get to her parents, she would have been swallowed by the blaze. But it was hard not to feel guilty. And what happened to her now? Was she really going to be sent away to a stranger in South Africa?

It was then that she spotted a cream envelope on Mr Grice's desk. There was something familiar about it. She picked it up and studied the address on the back. It was written in neat blue pen and it read: Gwyn Thomas, Sawubona Game Reserve, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Martine searched her memory. Where had she seen that handwriting before? Then it came back to her. She'd watched her mum opening these envelopes every month for as long as she could remember. Nothing had ever been said about them, but Martine had always detected a change in her mum after she'd read the letters. She seemed to smile more, to laugh more easily. To Martine, sitting abandoned and confused among Mr Grice's dusty files, it was all the more upsetting that her mum had never told her that the letters came from her grandmother, or even that she had a grandmother at all. Why was it such a secret?

Martine thought about the signature on the letter: Gwyn Thomas. It sounded so stern. She found it difficult to grasp that such a person might be her grandmother, let alone that she might have to call her Grandmother or,

worse still, Granny. She couldn't even think of her as Gwyn. For some reason the whole name – Gwyn Thomas – stuck in her head.

Mr Grice returned to the office shaking his head. 'I'm afraid your options are extremely limited,' he said. 'I've managed to find you a bed in the children's home in Upper Blickley—'

'It's okay,' Martine interrupted, 'I've decided I'll go to South Africa after all.'

Mr Grice heaved a huge sigh of relief. 'Well,' he said, 'that settles it.'



Right from the start, it was obvious that everyone around Martine was much more excited about her new future than she was. 'A *game reserve in Africa,*' said Miss Rose in awe. 'Just think, Martine, it'll be like spending your life on safari.'

Mrs Morrison seemed to be convinced she'd be eaten by a tiger. 'You'll have to be vigilant,' she told Martine. 'But oh, what an adventure it'll all be!'

Martine rolled her eyes inwardly. Mrs Morrison was the kindest woman in the world, but she was absolutely clueless when it came to the animal kingdom. 'There are no tigers in Africa,' Martine had to keep telling her. 'Not unless they're in zoos.'

Apart from that one detail, she herself knew very little about Africa. When she tried to picture it, all she could

come up with was big yellow plains, umbrella trees, mangoes, dark faces and baking hot sun. She wondered if wild animals literally roamed the streets. Would she be able to have one as a pet? Martine's mum had been allergic to animals so Martine had always been kept away from them, but ever since she was tiny she'd yearned to have one of her own. Perhaps she could get a monkey.

Then she remembered the tone of her grandmother's letter and the crashing feeling came surging back. Gwyn Thomas didn't sound like the kind of person who would say yes to a primate in her living room. If she even *had* a living room. For all Martine knew, her grandmother could live in a grass hut.

At school, most of her classmates seemed to have forgotten that barely three weeks had gone by since her home had burnt to the ground and that she was hardly going to South Africa out of choice. 'You're sooo lucky,' they kept telling her. 'You'll be able to learn to surf and everything. It'll be so cool.'

Listening to them, Martine thought that the one good thing about moving to Africa was that she'd never again have to enter the grim gates of Bodley Brook Junior. She didn't fit in here. Come to think of it, she'd never fitted in anywhere with children her own age, but somehow it hadn't mattered when her mum and dad were around because *they* were her best friends. Her dad had been a doctor who worked very long hours, but in the summer he took time off and they'd go camping in Cornwall, where her mum would paint and she and her dad would swim or fish or he'd teach her a little first aid. And every

weekend, come rain or shine, they always had fun, even if it was only making pancakes. Now it was over and there was a hole in Martine's heart.

On Saturday morning, the day before she was due to fly to Cape Town, Miss Rose took her shopping for summer clothes on Oxford Street in London. An icy grey rain was falling and the entire road was a sea of frenzied consumers and tourists poking umbrellas in each other's eyes, but nothing could dampen Miss Rose's enthusiasm.

'Look at these cute shorts!' she said to Martine as they fought their way around Gap. 'What a great baseball cap! Oh, I can just see you in this stripy red T-shirt.'

Martine just let her go on. If the truth be known, she felt ill. Her stomach was a bubbling cauldron of nerves and her mouth was dry with fear at the prospect of what tomorrow would bring. 'Whatever you think,' she kept saying as Miss Rose presented her with clothing options. 'Yes, it's nice. Yes, I'm sure it'll be fine.'

She ended up with two pairs of khaki shorts, a pair of jeans, four T-shirts, a baseball cap and a pair of tough, camel-coloured hiking boots. The only time she was forced to put up a fight was when Miss Rose tried to insist on a floral-print dress. Martine, who had cropped brown hair and bright green eyes, had refused to wear a dress since the age of five, and she had no intention of starting now.

'I'll get bitten by a snake if I don't have proper protection,' she told Miss Rose.

'But surely you run the same risk if you wear shorts?' protested her teacher.

'Yes,' said Martine, 'but that's *different*. Have you ever seen an explorer who didn't wear shorts?'

Back in Hampshire that evening, Miss Rose cooked a farewell dinner for Martine – a roast chicken with crispy potatoes, garden peas, homemade Yorkshire pudding and onion gravy. Mr and Mrs Morrison came over and Mrs Morrison presented Martine with a pair of binoculars that had belonged to an old uncle.

'To help you spot the big cats,' she told Martine.

Martine was very moved, particularly when Mrs Morrison also gave her a large slice of homemade chocolate cake carefully packed in a lunchbox for her journey.

'I wish you much happiness, dear,' Mrs Morrison said emotionally. 'Remember that you'll always have a home with Mr Morrison and me.'

Mr Morrison just grunted in agreement. He was a man of few words. But when his wife turned away to thank the teacher for the meal, he put his hand in his coat pocket and brought out a carved wooden box. 'To keep you safe,' he said in a low voice, giving it to Martine. Then he opened his car door and started the engine.

'Ready, love,' he called to Mrs Morrison. 'See you, then, Martine.'

Martine waited until she was alone in Miss Rose's spare room that night to open the box. Inside she found a pink Maglite torch, a Swiss Army knife and a first-aid kit. She could hardly believe her eyes. She laid everything out on the bed and spent several rapturous minutes reading the survival leaflet that accompanied it all. The

generosity of everyone was very touching. After a while, she repacked her presents carefully, turned off the light and lay on the bed. A full moon beamed in through the window, laying a silver path across the room.

Despite herself, Martine began to feel excited. By tomorrow night she'd be on a plane bound for Africa and a life she could not even begin to imagine. For better or worse, Fate was closing a door on the past.

