Kevin Fisher

Now Now

Plane landings spur multiple microtraumas. Swooping over a darkened city with low-lying buildings and lines of traffic, I anticipate the bump bump bump bump screech lurch lurch shudder sigh of the landing to come. Was the plane serviced by someone suddenly sitting up awake wondering if they forgot to put that tube back in? There is also the trauma of what happened while you were up there. The trauma of the texts. Texts from 4,000 miles away. Business travel when you have small children is like walking out of a burning building. A lot can happen in the air: lost toys, fevers, falls, exhaustion, resentment, rage, maybe divorce.

As we taxi, my phone finds a signal after many hours of flights. Two texts from home: "Where are you?" and "Ugh. The dog ate marbles," but nothing more serious. And nothing from Patience, the woman I have travelled seventeen hours to see.

The visa line has the comforting feel of a 1940s Bogart film. A languid rotating fan. Barely adult officials in damp uniforms, heads down, stamping and stamping and stamping. The line buzzes with a caffeinated tour group in matching T-shirts excited to be starting their adventure. They have come to "Save the Rhinos."

"That will never happen," I had finally said mid-flight to Shelia of the insistent middle-seat bladder. "They just want your money."

Outside the terminal is even hotter and ablaze at night with yellow sodium lights. My name on a torn piece of cardboard is held high in a crowd. A hand grabs my bag and guides me through a group of men with their own cardboard signs, past the new air-conditioned tour bus awaiting the rhino people.

This is supposed to be a short trip for me. A last-minute "now now" trip to check on Patience, who received a grant from Lone Voices where I work and disappeared. Or not disappeared. Ghosted us. Stopped answering calls, emails, and texts. She was due her first quarterly finance report six months ago. This had made Reggie, my expatriate South African boss, call me into his office to tell me, "Come back with those reports or our cash."

Lone Voices had given a grant to Patience to work on gender and queer rights. She was doing work only a local can do. People who need to hear about the humanity of fellow nationals they think are a stain or less than won't be lectured from New York. Reggie had met Patience at an airport bar, where she introduced herself as an activist and vaginal ecologist, and he had been beguiled by her global plan to reinvent gender politics. Reggie takes her silence very personally.

At Lone Voices we support people who speak out, armed often with just a cell phone, a few brave friends, a rhyming chant, and a clever, handwritten sign. We are small and don't give out many grants. We have many people we could support. I work in finance, but staffers always come back with stories of people they meet we could fund. Women engaged in sex work to feed their children. Gay men stopped by police for anal exams on the roadside. Young women who need bikes for school so they can speed past packs of men drinking by the road. Or just people who have to walk a half-marathon to health care, school, or a job. All living a life that would break me and needs to change before it breaks them.

But not everyone can get funded. It was just math. And if you get funded, then you have to get in your quarterly reports. Because that's what keeps the money flowing. Don't be the person who ruins it for everyone.

The highway is deserted at night, but there are well-lit billboards for the president, who has been in power since before the internet.

"First time here?" asks the driver.

"Yes," I say.

"Ah. You are from America? What do you think about Trump?"

I am silent.

"He makes me laugh," says the driver.

"You're lucky, then," I say flatly.

I find a signal as we make our way to the hotel and text Patience again. Dots appear below my message, but no response. She is out here. Awake. Somewhere.

We drive past the president's mansion. A high wall topped with razor wire illuminated by yellow lights. It is free of graffiti and the ubiquitous posters everywhere displaying long cell numbers offering concrete, electric fences, penis enhancement, and abortions.

The hotel lobby is deserted. An older man in an Old Navy T-shirt copies my passport as I complete a two-page registration form. The Wi-Fi password is handed to me on a tiny slip of paper. We don't talk as he carries my small bag to the room, opens the door, and turns on the TV very loud. He uses a remote to turn on the AC. The room has the feel of an old Florida motor inn existing in that world between chill and mold.

I can't sleep. It's 2 a.m. here, but at home my people are awake. I give up on sleep until 5 a.m., when I fall asleep in a chair. At 8 a.m. there is a knock at the door. It's Kenneth, the local lawyer I hired to find Patience. Kenneth is perhaps thirty and tall. He wears a dark suit and white shirt with a collar several sizes too big. Kenneth shows me his phone screen. Posing as a friendly activist, he has found Patience on a WhatsApp group. She's speaking later today at the parliament.

I get a text from home: "Going to the vet."

No sleep is catching up with me, so I breakfast at the hotel to wake up. This is a tea country, so coffee is instant. There is also nothing I can really eat. There is a buffet with rice and fish—or is it meat?—in thick, dark brown sauce, and some local, unripe fruit. My parents ran a diner. We often ate what we could not serve, so food nausea is in my blood. I only really eat at home. These trips are hard because I spend the time starving and not sleeping.

My phone rings as I sit in the breakfast room waiting for my banana to ripen. It's home. A call is a serious escalation.

"What's up?" I ask.

"We are at the vet," Laura says. "I had to bring everyone because you aren't here. The dog swallowed marbles."

"Oh no. That's too bad," I say, knowing whatever I say will be wrong and inadequate.

"The vet wants five thousand dollars to operate."

I take a moment. "Can't he… I don't know, poop out the marbles?"

"What? No. Do you want to put the dog down? Is that what you want?" she says sharply, her frustration showing.

"I didn't say that," I say with a calmness that is really just total exhaustion, but that I can feel is driving Laura crazy.

"Well then what?" she says after a beat.

"I don't know," I say, trying to sound sad. "I have to go. I'm in a meeting." Silence on the line. "Bye."

I hang up. I sit and resent the dog, but it's unsatisfying as resentments go.

The parliament building is white and colonial, but unlike the president's mansion it is open to anyone willing to endure several metal detectors and the scrutiny of a police dog. The room where Patience will speak is standing room only. I am the only foreigner, so my entrance causes a small frisson of interest in the room. The guard at the door motions briskly that I should take a seat in a small sliver of bench at the rear that is free. The woman next to the sliver of bench looks up to see if she will have to move aside or get up. I shake my head no. Everyone turns away now. I am clearly not important, or I would have taken the seat.

In the front row, I see, sits Patience. She is a young woman in a bright blue and orange dress, which I recall are also the national colors. Her hair is set high on her head in the sea of men with shaved heads in the audience and on the podium.

The first speakers praise the president and the government for its leadership in recent elections. When Patience finally speaks, it is more than an hour later. Unlike the other speakers, she does not speak with a light British accent but sharply in another language I do not understand. I don't know what she is saying, but the men on the podium do. The panel shifts uncomfortably and, unlike the other speakers, she is often interrupted. Finally, she is pointed to sit down by the chairman.

She does not sit down and continues to speak until the chairman stands in obvious derision but also with fear, as if what she is saying might be infectious. Then the members of the podium stand, and all of them file out. Security guards approach Patience, but she walks back following the chairman. The mood of the room is sour.

The room empties. I find Patience outside. As I approach her, I see she is younger and smaller than I imagined, and delicate, maybe not even twenty-five. She nods at me as she passes as if she expected me to be here.

I follow her outside. We stand in the sun, wilting a bit. A teenage boy in a black *Curry 30* T-shirt holding leaflets whispers to her. No one else speaks to her. The chairman is surrounded by a group of men who listen and nod and sometimes laugh and look our way. Patience and I stand alone with the teenager by the taxis. Her eyes are moist, and she shudders a little.

Maybe this is our meeting, so I start talking. “Patience. I have been trying to speak with you about your grant.”

None of what I say lands with her as she looks around quickly. There’s lots of noise from the crowd around us, so I’m not sure even if she heard me. But she is still trembling.

“Can we go somewhere else to talk?” I ask her.

The teenager nods and waves to a taxi driver. The driver looks away. He understands we are trouble and prefers not to drive us. The teenager leans to talk to the driver through the passenger window. The driver’s head bobs back and forth before deciding. Then he nods, looking around to make sure no one is looking, and waves us quickly into the car. As we pull away, I see the crowd outside the Parliament is getting bigger.

“Where are we going?” I ask Patience but get no answer.

Patience’s eyes are dry now, but she looks out the window. I also have a new text. It is from home. A photo. Of what, I don’t know. Then I realize it’s dog poo smeared thinly on a plate.

The taxi stops on the dusty shoulder of the highway twenty minutes away. We get out and the teenager points to a dirt path through some reeds to houses. I don’t know where we are going. In the distance I can hear many cars honking their horns like the aftermath of a football match.

“Let’s talk here,” I say.

“No, at the house,” he teenager says, pointing to the path.

“Here,” I say.

“No, at the house,” the teenager repeats.

“I’m going back to the hotel,” I say. This doesn’t feel safe for them or me, but I can leave.

“The Sun Palace Hotel, do you know it?” I ask the driver, who looks to the boy before answering.

“The road is closed now,” says the teenager. The driver nods that he’s right. “You can’t stay here. It’s not safe. Come,” the teenager says and pays the driver.

He and Patience start walking away.

“Go with them,” the driver tells me, and he rolls up his window and drives away.

I run to catch up to Patience. It’s getting dark. Patience and the teenager walk through a field to a white stucco house ringed with cinder block walls topped with razor wire. The teenager waves me into the open front door of the house. I go inside the house where there are children

and an older woman who might be Patience's mother. The woman kisses the teenager, who I realize might be Patience's brother.

"We have to talk," I say to Patience.

"After we eat," she says.

Rust-colored rice comes out. I still can't eat anything. The grandmother notices and pushes a plate of watery soup toward me when suddenly the lights go out. Immediately candles are lit. We sit in semidarkness. It is very hot.

"Patience," I say, "I need your report on what you have been doing or we need our grant back."

Patience doesn't answer, but the room is flooded in light shining through the metal window shades. It is like dawn in the house, and the honking begins.

The teenager looks through the window shades. Patience is suddenly standing next to me.

"It's the police," she says. "Don't worry. You go out and speak to them?"

"Why me?" I ask.

"They will listen to you."

"Listen to what?"

"Whatever you say. Just go out. Or they will come in and it will not be good."

The teenager moves the curtain aside so I can see. It's hard to see in the glare, but there are several jeeps in the courtyard, their lights on the house, and behind them glimpses of moving men. The honking of cars continues in a jerky rhythm. Patience gathers up the children and her mother and sends them upstairs.

"Wait," I say.

I call home. The phone rings, but there is no answer. After a beep, I say, "Get the marbles out of the dog whatever it costs. Love you."

Patience and the teenager walk with me out the front door. We walk out slowly because we are afraid and unable to see where we are going, blinded by the light. I stand there, unable to move forward. There is shouting from the jeeps. The headlights are so bright that I can't make out anything but the yellow-rimmed, milky light. I look at my hands and they look like white linen. I feel someone pulling my arm. It is Patience.

"Tell them to leave."

I take a breath, and I shout in a way I do at my daughter's soccer games: "Go away. We are not afraid."

Although we are.

I shout to the men in the jeeps about my family, and the Lone Voices, and my dog who is sick from eating marbles. Anything to keep talking and keep them where they are. And I think I might sound crazy and that feels good. Finally, Patience puts her hand over my mouth and pulls me back into the house. There is shouting from the jeeps as she does, and she shouts back in a language I again don't understand except I hear the words 'New York.'

Back in the house the lights are dim. I see fireballs in my vision from staring into the headlights. There is still shouting, but the honking stops. I hear jeeps drive away. Patience leads me to a sofa where we sit in silence until it becomes quiet. Eventually, I close my eyes and sleep.

I awake to cooking smells but don't open my eyes, listening, postponing re-entering Patience's world. The noise in the morning is diffuse and very human. I hear children's voices.

I open my eyes and everyone sitting in the living room is looking at me, and then they all quickly look away. Patience brings me instant coffee with UHT milk.

"We need to get you to the airport," she says as she hands me some papers, and I see a bank statement. "All of your reports. We have only spent a little. Sorry to make you come. We needed you here more. Come back."

Less than thirty-six hours after I arrived, I am back on a plane, looking forward, if you can imagine, to airplane food. The cabin doors close, but I get a text from home. It is a photo. Again, smeared dog poo on a plate, but this time two marbles stand out.

Kevin Fisher is an editor and writer for the *Cornwall Chronicle*. He also writes plays and belongs to writing groups at Ensemble Studio Theatre. Kevin is a trained epidemiologist who worked in HIV prevention advocacy for two decades. He graduated from Brown University and received his JD from New York University School of Law and his master's from Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. He is a climate activist with 350Brooklyn and an avid long-distance walker.