

## **MATARA**

A full-length play in one act  
By Conni Massing

March 30, 2016

Contact information:

#104 – 11220 – 99 Ave.

Edmonton, AB T5K 2K6

(780) 437-2783

[conni@connimassing.com](mailto:conni@connimassing.com)

*Darkness. The sounds of a zoo coming to life. A whistling call. Silence. Some chattering which builds into a chorus, only to be superseded by the roar of a big cat. Silence except for murmuring. More birdcall. Hoots, chipchipcharoo. Call and response. Nicker and snorting.*

*Thunderclaps. A sudden downpour of rain. Sound of rushing water building and overwhelming the animal sounds.*

*The animal sounds fade up again only now they are agitated, panicked.*

*In the half-light we may see blurry images of wild animals and frantic movement.*

*Add to this a layer of human voices, the meaning of the words indistinguishable save for the urgent tone.*

*Eventually some of the voices become distinct from the general chaos. Calling out:*

VOICES: Jared! Derek! Just get - move him up the ramp! Hurry! Over here! Where's Mandy - Clara is here but -there's no time! Just go!

*A cacophony of natural sounds (animal cries, human voices raised in command or panic) along with inorganic sounds (vehicle engines, media reports). The wave builds, subsides, builds again, like a radio tuning. Then everything stops. Silence.*

-----  
*Lights up on KAREN (early forties), WENDELL (African immigrant, late twenties) and ROMNEY (mid-thirties) at "the Inquiry."*

*Note: The time-space reality of the inquiry may be suggested by a simple shift in lighting or by moving to an area of the stage dedicated to the proceedings.*

KAREN: The night of the flood...

WENDELL: Nature broke through.

ROMNEY: It was... biblical.

KAREN: I was with Matara.

WENDELL: The stage was set. Each animal posed amidst their specially designed dioramas.

ROMNEY: Who is it that turns into a pillar of salt?

KAREN: I *knew* her.

WENDELL: The illusion would not hold.

KAREN: I was with her when...

ROMNEY: Some woman looking back at the wickedness - Rome burning or –

WENDELL: Sodom and Gomorrah. And you are – what is the expression - a far cry from Lot's wife.

KAREN: Romney's little stunt didn't help.

ROMNEY: See? I agreed to look back.

WENDELL: When I was in convent school, one of the nuns who knew of my rather traumatic past used to pat me on the arm and say "try not to dwell on it." And yet here we are. Is this meant to be "truth and reconciliation"? Or are we simply picking over the bones?

KAREN: The truth?

WENDELL: The truth is: I believe the worst of this could have been prevented. I am only the night watchman and I have no opinions. But I can tell you what I observed.

ROMNEY: It's my word against his – that image is so blurry – it could have been anyone.

*A shift. Each of them is now being questioned separately.*

KAREN: Ever since I was a kid. I guess back then it felt like make believe. I talked to my captured dragonflies and whispered to the snakes slithering through our yard, trying to make up a language they would understand. Understanding Bunny – a pet rabbit I got when I was ten - was the first time an animal answered me back. In colours and pictures, nothing like human words. But then I didn't really feel human anyway. (*listens to a question*) I don't know how to explain it – only sometimes I wondered if I was an alien brought down to earth. I just couldn't figure out why I'd been sent.

ROMNEY: Look, the two people who interviewed me for this job never at any point asked me if I was an animal lover. Though I may have suggested - with my passionate speech about wild horses and dolphins – they may have inferred that I was - well they didn't hire me to pet the monkeys, did they?

KAREN: From then on I was able to...understand.

ROMNEY: They hired me to overhaul the image of this institution in the wake of some very negative interactions with the public – i.e. protesters and press - following some unfortunate incidents - i.e. tragic animal deaths. Everything I did was intended to further that objective. *(listening)* That’s offensive.

*ROMNEY exits.*

KAREN: April 30<sup>th</sup>. Cheerio, our male elephant, dies of a respiratory infection. Jim – *(clarifying for the inquiry)* his lead keeper – Jim, the vet – Doc Clara - and I spend the night in Cheerio’s enclosure. He dies at dawn. We are devastated and Matara – our female elephant – *listening to a question* - to the public she was known as Nelly. But her real name was Matara. It’s because visitors to the zoo constantly called out to her. “Nelly – look over here! Over here! “And so on. We didn’t want her to be distracted by contradictory commands so she had a public name and a private name. Anyway. Matara is also devastated by the death of Cheerio. She stands nearby and sort of bellows. She just seems to know...

WENDELL: The animals know.

*WENDELL and KAREN exit. With the sounds of the zoo coming to life we shift from the inquiry to the past.*

-----

*Dawn. A whistling call. Silence. Some chattering which builds into a chorus, only to be superseded by the roar of a big cat. Silence except for murmuring. More birdcall. Hoots, chipchipcharoo. Call and response. Nickering and snorting. Building to a glorious cacophony of animal sound. Then, topping all the sound, a loud, bone-rattling elephant trumpet.*

*KAREN enters with MATARA, a 35-year-old Asian elephant represented on stage as an ever-shifting, impressionistic video image. The interactions between Karen and Matara are live.*

KAREN: Good afternoon and welcome to the elephant talk. My name is Karen and this is Nelly. She is an Asian elephant and she has lived here at the zoo for most of her life. I have known Nelly for most of my life, too, because the first time I came to the zoo I was... *(pointing to someone in the audience)* about your age...and Nelly had just arrived.

Elephant facts. Nelly has a very flexible and powerful tool in the form of a trunk. She can tear down a tree or pick up a blade of grass with this handy dandy thing. Along with dolphins and great apes, elephants are the only animals known to recognize themselves in the mirror.

*The commands to MATARA are embedded in a phrase (indicated by italics) and expressed in a commanding tone.*

(to MATARA) And you're quite the beauty *isn't that right?*

*MATARA nods her head. Applause from the elephant talk audience.*

My job is to keep Nelly healthy. She has exercise and enrichment every day to challenge her mind and keep her fit. For instance, sometimes I hide her food so she has to work a little bit harder to find it. Sometimes we do crafts, although Nelly isn't very good at origami, *are you?* (*MATARA shakes her head and the animal talk audience responds*) She likes classical music, peppermint and Picasso. (*more chuckles from her audience*) It's true – Nelly is a connoisseur of modern art and she also likes to make abstract paintings.

*We hear, very faintly at first, the sounds of a protest, a crowd of people chanting.*

Any questions? (*listens for a moment*) Nelly sleeps over there in the other end of her house. She braces herself against that big soft pile of sand. See? It makes it easier to get up in the morning. (*listening*) She is a vegetarian but she's been known to eat plastic. (*another question*) She was an orphan. (*beat*) We are her family.

*The sounds of the protest fade up and out.*

WENDELL: There are protesters outside the zoo every day now, Vincent. Their leader is called Jeremiah and he insists on addressing me as "Dude." I say he is free to call me this as long as I can refer to him as "exalted of the Lord." Jeremiah is confused as he evidently does not know the biblical meaning of his own name. Soon he begins to call me Wendell or simply "Hey."

KAREN: May 8<sup>th</sup>. Hey Mom -- hope you're having a good time. I think you are in Ecuador by now. And probably seeing some beautiful birds. But remember that I also wanted you to look out for one of the many different kinds of coral snake that

are native to that area of the world. Also the banana slugs are pretty impressive. Just, remember to look down as well as up.

*ROMNEY gives a speech to the zoo staff.*

ROMNEY: I am here to change the story of this zoo. Right now, in the aftermath of Cheerio dying and the unfortunate incident with the harbour seals, the word out there seems to be: this is a place where animals do not thrive.

KAREN: *(to Mom)* I haven't done anything on the list you gave me. Number one: have more relationships with humans. Did you have someone in particular in mind? Number two: Get rid of the fire-bellied toads in the spare room. Maybe you're hoping they'll die while you're gone? To be fair, you knew about me fostering animals when you moved in.

WENDELL: I do respect the passion of this group. They come each day, pleading for Nelly – Matara - to be sent to a sanctuary where she would have the company of other elephants, especially now that the one other member of her species is gone.

KAREN: *(to Mom)* I miss you. And Matara misses Cheerio.

WENDELL: Vincent? I miss you every day.

ROMNEY: And who is the audience for this story? The public, by which I really mean parents. Protesters: a small but vocal contingent of Wildwatch disciples who are not likely to engage with our message. The media—who will help us if we help them.

KAREN: *(to Mom)* You know I'm not totally against protests. I mean, normally. I think they keep us honest and besides, sometimes it forces the city to make improvements, to spend money. But these guys...

WENDELL: *(pulls a pamphlet out of his pocket)* I find these everywhere. The protesters are very concerned about elephants but not very worried about trees. *(reading)* Nirvana Elephant Sanctuary: a refuge for aged, ailing and abused elephants.

ROMNEY: I plan to work with the communications director, obviously – but also all of you who work directly with the animals - in order to create a brand new forward-looking narrative. Thank you.

WENDELL: I try to get Jeremiah and his acolytes to move off the property but they feel... entitled. To be here. And to call for the closure of all zoos.

KAREN: Are you kidding? It's not the first time I've heard this but I find myself yelling when Wendell tells me -- they have no idea what they're talking about! Seeing wild animals in a zoo was pretty much the most important thing that happened to me as a kid. It changed my life! I think it changes the lives of most kids -- otherwise a lot of them would never ever see a wild animal, except for deer and maybe a coyote or two. Most kids will never have the chance to go on a safari but they can come right here and see a tiger or a lion or an elephant. A real live elephant. These animals are ambassadors for their species. How else will the people who see them learn to care about animals so that they will stand up for the ones who are being driven out of their homes by industry or war or climate change?

WENDELL: This is the most that Karen has ever said to me since I began work here last summer. I think even she is surprised.

KAREN: I have no empathy for anything *but* animals. Humans mostly just confuse me.

*WENDELL listens.*

WENDELL: You must try to rest.

-----  
*KAREN with MATARA*

*KAREN communicates with MATARA in two voices: one more intimate, as she leans in close to Matara or whispers into her ear flap; the other used to give commands to Matara and communicate with the other keepers.*

KAREN: Good morning my lovely chum. *What did you dream about? Rainforest and bananas and sunshine? Huh? I had a dream you could fly. And I think I was right beside you. In a balloon. (a command) Foot. (leans in and examines a foot) I'm going to trim off this little bit. Jim'll get you a treat. (begins to work) Feels like spring today, huh?*

*Nice day for a roam around the world. (a command) Foot. Thank you, madam. First we'll go to the ocean, huh? And see the seals. (examining a foot) Ooh, that looks a bit tender. Then we'll keep on going to Hawaii. On a barge, with the*

*whales all around us. (another command) Down. Good girl. (A gentle pat or stroke) Hey Brenda, wanna prep the foot soak?*

*MATARA sways from side to side. KAREN lays her hands gently on Matara's flank.*

KAREN: Are you dancing? Is that a waltz? Mom says I damn well better not tell anyone at the zoo that I think I can talk to you. I tell her it's not really like a conversation. It's more like a... knowing. She thinks that's creepy.

ROMNEY I'd like to provide a little context! Because you need to understand the pressure I was under to produce a miracle. Nothing was done without consultation. For instance, I asked the staff to give me suggestions for programming – contests, outreach, hooks for the media - and they did. Everyone but Karen.

KAREN: *(to MATARA)* Romney says she's been researching – I think that means she's been watching videos on YouTube. She tells me about an elephant in Korea who mimics human speech. What would you say if you could mimic Romney?

*MATARA makes a sound. KAREN laughs but then watches as MATARA sways from side to side.*

KAREN: *(to MATARA)* I'm worried about you.

ROMNEY: Hey kids! Write a poem about your favourite zoo animal -- and win a prize!

KAREN: May 15. We had a blizzard last night. A freak spring storm at the tail end of the worst winter we've had in a hundred years. Matara likes leaving tracks in the snow so we go for a walk. We're on our little tour and I stop to answer my radio. Matara keeps going toward the river. The snow will probably melt by tomorrow. At least that's what I tell Wendell -

WENDELL: Kinyarwanda, Vincent! In May! The seasons here are meant to be guidelines for when to expect grass and flowers as opposed to frost and ice -

KAREN: "Will it never end?" he says. I say Matara is probably wondering the same thing.

WENDELL: My colleague Karen laughs and says that July is the only month that they have not had snow here.

KAREN: *(a command)* Matara, come!

WENDELL: So many strange sights. An artificial palm bent sideways from the weight of snow. An elephant from sunny Sri Lanka standing in front of a curtain of misting sleet that is like fog.

*MATARA ambles up to Karen, who pats her.*

KAREN: Whatcha doing? Going down to the water? Wendell says he heard on the news that we have a full-size river boat moored downstream! I've lived here all my life and I didn't know that. It was on the news because the owners are in financial trouble. In the summer they do prime rib dinners and have live music while they float down the river. In the winter they can't make any money because the boat is frozen in place. In the winter we're all frozen in place.

WENDELL: I didn't realize I had spoken out loud. I told her you were my brother. I didn't say you were a ghost.

KAREN: That night I dream about the river boat – the ark - for the first time.

-----

ROMNEY: *(reading)* "Remember Me" by Ashley Froman  
Is it true that elephants never forget?  
I know I will never forget seeing Nelly today  
So big and gentle and maybe her flappy ears heard my whisper  
Nelly is beautiful!

KAREN: May 19<sup>th</sup>. Doc Clara examines Matara. She has a respiratory infection and this last round of antibiotics didn't work. I can tell Doc is worried though she says she doesn't think it's the same infection that Cheerio had. I tell her about Matara swaying from side to side because I know that kind of repetitive movement is sometimes a symptom of mental illness in humans. Doc looks at me funny. At least I think she does. Sometimes I can't read facial expressions. I tell her I think Matara is still grieving for Cheerio. Doc says she's definitely missing the stimulation provided by another elephant.

ROMNEY: *(reading)* If Nelly could talk I think she would tell us a joke  
About elephants in the room...

*ROMNEY makes a face. KAREN brings a watermelon into MATARA's enclosure.*

KAREN: Look what Jim brought for you.

*KAREN sets up the watermelon so that MATARA can stomp on it.*

KAREN: Go crazy.

*MATARA ignores the watermelon, sways from side to side.*

ROMNEY: *(reading)* I like the art Nelly makes  
She paints the sunrise and sunset  
Does she see that by our river?  
Or remember a hotter sun from Sri Lanka

KAREN: Bananas?

*KAREN offers MATARA a couple of bananas.*

KAREN: Trunk up. Up!

*MATARA curls one up with her trunk and throws it over KAREN'S head.*

KAREN: Mattie! Jim – wanna bring her ball?

*MATARA picks up the second banana and eats it.*

ROMNEY: *(reading)* Swinging through the trees  
Or should I say monkey bars  
Monkey business is cool

KAREN: Good girl.

ROMNEY: Is that supposed to be a haiku?

KAREN: *(peers into MATARA'S face)* Is it Cheerio – do you miss him?

*KAREN leans in, closes her eyes, listens.*

ROMNEY: *(reading)* Is Matara sick? She looked so old  
Will she die here?  
When she dies will she be buried at the zoo?  
What if it's winter and the ground is frozen?

*(to inquiry)* This is what I was dealing with!

*ROMNEY crumples up this entry and exits. KAREN steps away from MATARA.*

KAREN: Darkness and sad shapes floating in...water? Silence.

*KAREN leans against MATARA, caresses her eye area or scratches her tongue.*

-----

WENDELL: After checking on Matara at the end of my shift – *(listening to a question)* It's difficult to say because elephants can sleep standing up. Much like myself. As I was saying, it was my habit to sit by the river at the end of my shift. Close my eyes. Put my worries and cares in a small boat and send it downstream. Normally the river whispered and sighed. But after the spring storm, the river was too busy to stop and talk. I know some rivers back home but I don't know the character of this one except that it is fed by mountain streams and snow. When I asked about the rushing water I was told it was the "spring run-off." No one was concerned.

KAREN: Elephants are very emotional. They celebrate when they get together with long-lost friends and family members. They trumpet loudly and squirt urine. They also grieve when a member of their tribe is killed, gathering around the corpse or the bones.

WENDELL: Yes I do digress. Forgive me, but I must provide some context.

KAREN: I just wanted to say that maybe elephants never forget but they usually move on. Matara wasn't. The night of the flood...

WENDELL: *(listening)* I understand. I will attempt to share only whatever observations I made in my capacity as a security guard. The night of the catastrophe, when I

checked in on Matara? The gate to the yard surrounding her enclosure was open.

KAREN: I blame Romney.

WENDELL: Yes, I did release the owls later that night. But – what are you suggesting?

ROMNEY: You think this inquiry is going to kill the rumours? Good luck with that.

-----

WENDELL: May 25. The anniversary of your death. This morning I come up from my river walk and there is Jeremiah, delivering a speech to a reporter and a television camera. He is speaking - rather poetically - about the dread season ahead. But it's almost summer, says the reporter. Jeremiah replies that "winter is always coming." And adds that when it does, there will be "no spongy jungle moss under the elephant's feet, just snow and concrete." I must confess, I can relate.

KAREN: Matara loves the snow!

WENDELL: Jeremiah finishes his performance – he embraces one of his acolytes – he's excited.

KAREN: The Wildwatch guy stops me on my way into the zoo. It's basically an ambush. He says "The zoo presumes to speak for Nelly the elephant. We just want to know: what does *Nelly* want?"

WENDELL: I'm walking across the parking lot to the bus stop when I see Karen and Jeremiah-

KAREN: She has lived here all her life! We love her, we are her family! The WildWatch guy rolls his eyes and I think about punching him. I don't – I won't - but the blood rushes to my face and I feel dizzy. Wendell shows up just in time.

WENDELL: I tell Jeremiah that if he harasses a staff member again, other than myself, I will call the police. He grins, says "Later, dude."

KAREN: Romney shows up, mostly to give me a lecture about "not engaging with the protesters." Then she looks past me, through me, like I'm not even there.

WENDELL: She smiles at me and says "What do we have here?"

ROMNEY: *Who* do we have here? It's just - I thought I'd met everyone who worked at the zoo. Wendell? My name is Romney.

WENDELL: Later that same day the Wildwatch group presents a petition to city council, they are adamant that she should be moved to a warmer climate. City council agrees to have Matara examined in order to determine whether she is well enough to travel. Karen had not heard....

KAREN: This is her home!

WENDELL: Romney tells her.

ROMNEY: I love giving people bad news. Well, someone has to do it, right? And I guess I like the little drama that unfolds. Once you state the purpose of the visit or the call, the other person stops breathing. You have their total focus. Then, when it's appropriate, you can also comfort them. Am I a little controlling? Do I like being the centre of attention? Sure. I do have a tiny bit of self-awareness, despite what you might think. When the news leaks that the zoo's lone gibbon has died—right in the middle of this controversy about our sick elephant—I spend a whole day working with communications finding a way to create a positive context for the news.

KAREN: I have to admit something - about the Wildwatch guy. Something he said stuck with me.

ROMNEY: I tell Wendell about the gibbon in person. Maybe I'm trying to get some kind of reaction from him – about anything. He doesn't even say thank you, he just looks kind of bewildered and says "is this really part of your job?" I laugh.

WENDELL: And then Vincent, I swear to you, she licks her lips and purrs like a cat. A cheetah or a mountain lion, not a tabby.

ROMNEY: One thing leads to another. No. I was hoping one thing would lead to another. He's the only person I've ever met who can be super-hot while he's sort of insulting you. He tells me I seem...materialistic.

WENDELL: Atavistic.

ROMNEY: Gonna have to look that up.

WENDELL: I ask Romney, what is the so-called "positive context" for the death of the gibbon?

ROMNEY: I mean it's the circle of life, right? Wendell just stares at me. I smile and say: "That's all I got."

WENDELL: Such good news, Vincent – your sudden death closed a loop.

ROMNEY: He nods and walks away. Really?

KAREN: I decided to find out what Matara wanted. So I could speak for her.

-----  
*Animal noises. We see the shadows of long-legged birds, monkeys swinging through branches, and a giraffe stretching her long neck up to the top of a tree. Then Matara, raising her trunk.*

*KAREN with MATARA*

KAREN: *(command)* Left foot. *(KAREN examines Matara's foot)* I totally trust Doc Clara but it's probably good to have a second opinion. Maybe this other vet will have some ideas about your respiratory infection. *(KAREN sets Matara's foot down.)* Everyone just wants the best for you.

WENDELL: I study the river instead of my thesis proposal. I learn that it is higher than it has been in fifty years.

KAREN: Wendell says they said on the news that the water is so high that the river boat might not be able to get under the bridge.

WENDELL: It begins as a glacier and ends in a bay. Some say the rising is cyclical and others say it is our own fault that the river is raging. I find I can't help but take this personally. I could ply my skills as an insomniac in an office building or a mall. But I took the job here so I could visit the river and feel connected to a living thing that is surging toward its home.

*Moves off, then:*

Jeremiah and his followers have a party to celebrate the city's decision. They build a fire down by the river and I can also see evidence that they are drinking alcohol. I sternly warn that if they do not deconstruct the campsite I will call the police. *(a beat)* I do not follow through on my threat. I just can't imagine it will make any difference.

Jeremiah lifts up his wine bottle and says “Here’s to the end of zoos.” I say this dynamic between humans and animals will never completely disappear. The original zoos were royal menageries. The lions and tigers kept in the Tower of London reflected the status of the monarch. Even now it is a sign of status to have seen the Big Five. Jeremiah makes a loud hooting noise. Yells: “Dude’s on side with us!” No - I have no opinion. Just an academic interest. I tell Jeremiah I’m writing a paper about colonial perspectives on Africa as depicted in literature. I add – because I think he might find this interesting – that there are many accounts of human zoos, a practice of displaying captive foreigners which began during the Renaissance - but Jeremiah is kissing one of the young women. It seems there are now other things on his mind.

-----

KAREN: May 29th. I meet with Doc Clara. I suggest maybe we could cancel the elephant talks for a few days. I’m worried that it will be obvious to anyone who sees Matara that she’s not herself right now because she misses Cheerio. And also - I just don’t want her to feel any extra pressure. Doc agrees but also says she never wants to send the message that we can’t meet the needs of our animals. I’m confused.

ROMNEY: I saw them as competing narratives: our animals are healthy and happy versus...well don’t forget it was all eyes on the zoo, what with the special vet coming in to examine our elephant.

KAREN: Mom has always said I need to get better about reading subtext. I’ll never be any good at that. I say what I mean. So do the animals.

ROMNEY: I just didn’t think the zoo should be apologizing for who they were. In fact, I thought they needed to expand their vision, extend their reach - think big. In addition to capitalizing on all the good news stories about species conservation, I suggested they get more animals. I told them I could help raise money for that.

KAREN: I’ve been bitten by a lemur, a snake, a gibbon, sprayed by skunks and snubbed by every kind of cat. But I’ve never been betrayed or abandoned or disappointed by an animal.

ROMNEY: The rule in my business is “under-promise, over-deliver.” I’ll confess I may have made a miscalculation in this case. I told the zoo I’d make a major

announcement at the time of their annual gala – in three weeks. I just didn't know what the hell that was going to be.

KAREN: I look into their eyes and I get so much back. I never feel that way about humans.

ROMNEY: The other rule in my business is you're only as good as your last gig. Frankly I don't even know how I managed to get this job without changing my name.

*She laughs but then quickly moves off.*

KAREN: May 31. Wendell and I talk when I leave for the day and he comes to start his shift. I say I wonder how long it will take for Matara to get over Cheerio. I know she'll never forget him but it has been weeks now and she's still sad. Now Wendell looks sad. At least I think he does.

WENDELL: In the wild animals do not have time to be depressed. If you do not live in the moment and stay vigilant you will be killed. But the animals here at the zoo have all the time in the world to...ruminant. As do I. But thinking about my thesis is not the same as actually writing it.

KAREN: I've never asked Wendell about his life outside of the zoo or from before he came here. He's never said. All I know is he's studying at the university and working here and - I almost ask him, in that moment. But he walks away. Says he won't get much reading done tonight because the protesters have built a camp by the river.

WENDELL: I have to submit a preliminary draft by the middle of June or I will owe another year of tuition. Needless to say I can't afford this. And if I don't continue with my studies I will be sent home.

ROMNEY: Yet another poem about Nelly. (*reading*) All the rivers of Asia and Africa are traced on her skin...

KAREN: Management said I was too emotionally involved with Matara? I can't argue with that. But I was realistic, too. I don't romanticize the animal kingdom; it's not all warm and fuzzy. Animals can be violent. Animals are unpredictable. They're *wild*.

ROMNEY: Routes for trade of salt and silk and spices

And places for tears to run.

KAREN: I paid attention every single moment I was with Matara. Because you just never know.

ROMNEY: Places for the tears? Maudlin we can do without.

KAREN: I tell Romney I could write a poem about the time Matara pushed Jim's truck out of a snowbank.

ROMNEY: I had to remind Karen that the poem was supposed to be written by a kid.

KAREN: I was trying to make a joke. But Matara really did push the truck out of the snow.

ROMNEY: The vet consultant arrives to examine Matara.

KAREN: Jim and Brenda and I help, getting Matara to cooperate. It's impossible to tell what he – the vet - thinks but he takes a lot of notes.

ROMNEY: If Matara is shipped off somewhere...

KAREN: I can't even imagine.

ROMNEY: I start to panic, just a little.

KAREN: I am her whole world. And she is mine.

ROMNEY: The results of the examination won't be available for at least a week. In the meantime I have a blinding epiphany. It's all about the elephant. Our happy, healthy elephant—who paints!

---

*MATARA stands in front of an easel. KAREN sets up small buckets of paint and brushes. ROMNEY is nearby filming the scene with her phone. KAREN isn't thrilled to be doing this and neither is MATARA.*

KAREN: We start by giving her a charcoal stick in case she wants to draw an outline of something.

*MATARA wields a brush with her trunk, then hands it back to KAREN. A smattering of applause from the onlookers.*

KAREN: And now a bit of colour. Nelly prefers blues and greens. But today...red?

*KAREN hands MATARA a brush and she puts a couple of paint strokes on the canvas. More applause. A little more painting.*

ROMNEY: We are so putting this on YouTube.

*KAREN hands MATARA another brush but MATARA hands it back to her.*

KAREN: And I think the painting may be done now. Nelly appreciates your applause; she also loves having her tongue rubbed as a reward for all her hard work.

*KAREN rubs MATARA'S tongue.*

ROMNEY: The zoo could have its own YouTube channel!

KAREN: (to MATARA) Hey, what's up?

*MATARA kicks over a bucket of paint, pushes the easel over.*

KAREN: Let's go for a walk.

*KAREN moves off with MATARA.*

ROMNEY: It seems perfectly reasonable to me that a child who writes a heartfelt poetic tribute to one of our animals could have a brief but completely thrilling ride on the back of an elephant as a prize.

KAREN: I guess Romney didn't get the memo about Matara being sick. Having some screaming kid on her back -

ROMNEY: Nelly probably eats more than the kid's weight in hay every single day. The ride could be one bloody minute long. And it would be a hell of a photo op.

KAREN: This is not a circus.

ROMNEY: Oh – and - today the guys from the Sun and the Tribune came out and I tried to set up one quick photo to advertise the gala. Excuse me for having a creative idea but I thought the elephant could wear one of those Venetian masks. For like, one minute.

KAREN: I think Romney should put the stupid mask on one of the goats in the petting zoo – or wear it herself.

ROMNEY: I might have to strangle Karen.

KAREN: I didn't actually say that. But I did walk away from her when she was still talking.

WENDELL: I confess I can no longer sleep when it's dark, even when I'm not working. It's an old habit. Insomnia - Romney says, when she stops at my shack before she leaves for the day. No - vigilance. She laughs as if I have made an extremely witty joke. Then leans in toward me and says "not even a cat nap?" I am being gently mauled before she makes a meal out of me, Vincent. *(beat)* Yes I have been living like a monk and she is extremely attractive.

*(to inquiry)* How is my relationship with Romney relevant? Or lack thereof.

*(listening)* You "wonder" if I opened Matara's gate the night of the flood. This is the impression you have been given by Romney?

.....

*Animal sounds and shadows. We see poor quality, slightly blurry video of MATARA in her compound on a webcam. KAREN is with Matara, ROMNEY is in a separate space.*

ROMNEY: I know for a fact that the vet recommended she be put on a diet.

KAREN: That was months ago.

ROMNEY: And now...all of Nelly's fans are eager to hear how the diet is going. So how's Nelly doing on her weight loss program, Karen? Karen ignores me. Karen? Finally she says, rather unhelpfully...

KAREN: She's losing weight because she's not eating.

ROMNEY: No shit. But I keep smiling. I ask if she would mind elaborating just a little bit? Like what kind of plan is Nelly following, anyway? Low-carb? High protein? The Paleo diet? I'm trying to be funny. Karen elaborates – Nelly's lost her appetite. Don't I *wish* I'd lose my appetite! Karen just looks at me. Call me crazy but I

wonder why we can't capitalize on the fact that Nelly is losing weight. Ahh, here we are. The weigh-in. Drum roll, please...

*MATARA steps on to a scale.*

ROMNEY: The last time we checked in, she weighed 8600 pounds. That's down one hundred and fifty pounds from her previous all-time high! Let's see how she's doing now – what's the good news, Karen?

*The webcam view suddenly disappears.*

ROMNEY: Piece of shit webcam! If I run over there with my phone maybe I can shoot a little video of her stepping on and off the scale.

KAREN: Matara's losing weight because she's lost her appetite. She's lost her appetite because she misses Cheerio. So all in all I'm not sure it's such a great idea to do the weigh-ins anymore. Romney thinks I'm blocking another one of her brilliant initiatives but I'm actually trying to help. People want to see Matara – I know that – but do they want to see her fading away in front of their eyes? I wish they'd fix the webcam though. I like to check in on Matara after I get home at night—she's all alone till six in the morning when the first shift comes in.

ROMNEY: I try to get a photo of Nelly to post on the site and she bats the phone out of my hand with her trunk! Guess I'll just tweet out the numbers. Down 175 pounds – whoot. Happy face.

KAREN: What kind of tweet will she send out if Matara is sent to the sanctuary? Romney says that will happen “over her dead body.”

ROMNEY: Karen says the elephant doesn't like the way I smell. Seriously, would it be such a bad thing if this whole zoo smelled less like manure and more like Chanel Number Five?

KAREN: She wants to know how we can call ourselves a zoo if we don't have an elephant. Is that a real question?

ROMNEY: Okay, I have been over-doing it on the perfume lately because I can't stand the smell of my own body. I should probably see someone about that.

-----

WENDELL: When the veterinarian consultant issues his report saying that travel is not advised for Matara due to her chronic respiratory infection, Jeremiah and his acolytes are very disappointed.

ROMNEY: Wildwatch barely took a breath before they moved on to the next initiative. They convinced Billy Bob Baxter, the former child star, to voice his support for their protest. Billy Bob did an interview on Entertainment Weekly and said he was willing to pony up for the cost of moving our elephant south.

WENDELL: They drown their sorrows with some alcohol – and also nearly drown Jeremiah.

KAREN: Romney suggests I watch the clip in case anyone asked me questions. Billy Bob gets everything wrong about Matara. Wrong age, wrong species and he has no idea what's involved with moving an animal this big and this intelligent. He doesn't even know her name. He calls her Netty and then suddenly starts talking about his new reality TV show: "Weird Celebrity Pets."

ROMNEY: Ahh, the delights of cross-promotion.

WENDELL: I believe the intent is to send a canoe down the river with a burning paper mache elephant. Jeremiah wades into the water to set the fire and is nearly swept away. The next morning I call for a meeting with the head of the zoo, to warn him about the river and about the increasing desperation of the protesters. He does not return my call.

ROMNEY: I'm only mentioning the Billy Bob thing by way of explaining how much pressure there was. On me.

KAREN: I really believe Matara could feel the pressure. To be everything. To be...so loved.

WENDELL: Jeremiah tells a gathering of reporters that the veterinarian consultant, Dr. Beaudoin, is the same vet who recommended that Felix the elephant at the Chicago Zoo not be moved and yet Felix was successfully re-located to Florida last winter.

KAREN: Does he really think we don't want the best for her?

ROMNEY: The truth? The elephant was our biggest attraction. *(listening)* Those are your words, not mine.

KAREN: I knew she would die if... *(long pause)* In my heart I think I knew she was dying.

-----

*Darkness. The sounds of a zoo coming to life. A whistling call. Silence. Some chattering which builds into a chorus, only to be superseded by the roar of a big cat. Silence except for murmuring. More birdcall. Hoots, chipchipcharoo. Call and response. Nicker and snorting.*

*These organic sounds are transformed into music, a refrain that rises and falls a few times before trailing off again into natural sounds.*

ROMNEY: I actually get the idea from Billy Bob what's-his-nuts. His making the grand gesture to finance the elephant "rescue." I need to find a major donor – someone who can afford to make a grand gesture to build a new display area or pay to get us another high profile acquisition. Maybe a rhinoceros. I have two weeks till the gala.

*KAREN with MATARA*

KAREN: Mom is back from Macchu Pichou. She sees the dark circles under my eyes and says I look like a depressed raccoon. Well for one thing, I've been hand-raising three baby meerkats and they need to be feed with a medicine dropper every hour. And it's true I have been coming into work more than I should.

*KAREN leans into MATARA, reaches up to stroke her.*

I would like to speak for you but you need to tell me what you want.

*KAREN closes her eyes and listens.*

ROMNEY: Good afternoon. Welcome to "perspectives on nature," a very special team-building exercise, designed with Alconbridge Oil in mind. As Horace Walpole said in 1777, "Alas! We are ridiculous animals." What can we learn from our friends in the animal kingdom? One of the things we admire the most is their ability to act on pure instinct. But what is an instinct? Are we able to identify anything in

ourselves that is raw and unschooled, unchecked by other cerebral functions? Let's start by making a list of instincts. To eat - to kill – to breed. How do we uncover instinct and then act on it in order to supercharge our professional interactions? To make and execute powerfully unambiguous decisions.

WENDELL: I still haven't admitted to my very kind sponsor that I am more interested in my English literature course than in my engineering thesis. I am meant to be useful when I go home. If I go home.

ROMNEY: Imagine you are in the jungle and it is deepest darkest night. You are waiting, listening; you are attuned to the sounds of your environment. You hear the scream of a howler monkey and you are unperturbed. The monkey is not a threat. Although they do reek. Actually this whole zoo has the most unbelievable pong on a warm day. But hey - maybe we need to get back to our real smells. Some of us already have. But I digress. Something I've noticed since I started this job: animals are not afraid to look us in the eye. With no subtext or shyness or judgement. And those gazes are...wild. Untamed. Is there anything of the wild left in us? I certainly hope so. Sometimes I think there's a little too much wild left in me.

WENDELL: Romney said she wanted my opinion about her presentation. Experience has taught me that when people say this they want you to confirm their point of view. I said her audience did seem to be attentive. Especially the alpha dog who asked all the questions that were a way of displaying his own knowledge. But I wasn't sure about the point of her speech. That we should emphasize our wild instincts while asking the animals to forget all of theirs? Overall her presentation was quite disheartening.

ROMNEY: He is totally impressed – I can tell. I ask Wendell if he noticed that I used the word atavistic? Just for his benefit. And the oil company employees all nodded like they knew what it meant. I had to tease him, though. I asked him if he really thought that I have “a tendency to return to an animal condition.” Perhaps he meant to use another word...

WENDELL: Feral? My attempt at humour.

ROMNEY: I know I said I was wild but I meant more like...hedonistic. Wendell is exotic. Smart. And he is flirting with me. At least I think he is. Either he's got the best

deadpan delivery I've ever seen or he really meant.... No, he was definitely flirting with me. All that talk about instincts...yum.

WENDELL: This discussion of the wild in all of us was a bit ironic in this context, I think. Considering Romney's actions. And also, in the context of the zoo. Where animals are less and less wild. Where their natural instincts are subjugated, suppressed. In the wild, some of these animals travel great distances every day. They roam, climb mountains, ford streams. At the zoo...perhaps it is a relief to the animals that they no longer have to spend the day searching for their food. But if an instinct is irrepressible, what happens when you are no longer permitted to act on it?

*(listening to a question)* Subversive? I told you, I took the job because I liked being by the river and...

ROMNEY: He keeps asking about the purpose of my seminar. I say – and I'm getting a little irritated now - that these people are genuinely interested in learning from the animals. A gut instinct, for instance, is a good thing, right? He just looks at me. Then asks why I took this job.

WENDELL: ...once I knew there was a great danger coming I couldn't leave until I could warn everyone. Failing that, I wanted to help save the animals.

ROMNEY: No background? That's not totally true. When I worked at the opera they did a production of Aida with some live animals.

WENDELL: Aida. Something else I probably should have referenced in my paper.

ROMNEY: The director wanted an elephant. He had to settle for a cheetah. A tame, farting cheetah. The whole thing was a nightmare.

WENDELL: It makes me laugh, the idea of the zoo as theatre. The animals posed in their diaramas, their scenarios. The zoos no longer call them cages. They are enclosures. Environments. The palm tree in the background is meant to represent all of the Amazon jungle. The white molded plaster, a snowbank in the high arctic. The audience and the animals are asked to suspend their disbelief.

ROMNEY: Wendell makes me nervous. I find myself confessing that I left my last job quite abruptly. And the one before that. I do not tell him - there was this thing with one of the interns. A young man. But Wendell has some kind of radar. The way

he looks at me, it's like he knows. He says he needs to sleep. Too bad, I say, assuming he'll pick up on the subtext.

WENDELL: I am still getting used to the women in this country, Vincent. I came to Canada for an education. So I try to keep an open mind.

ROMNEY: Sweet dreams.

-----

KAREN: June 8th. I help Doc Clara give Matara a shot. I say I wish I could comfort her. Doc pats me on the arm and says "time heals all wounds." Really, that's it? I don't think she's sleeping well and she's not eating properly and I don't tell Doc but she's also stopped communicating with me. I wish I knew how to listen to her.

Or to make someone listen to me.

ROMNEY: *(composing)* "There once was an elephant called Nelly. Not Babar, not Dumbo not Jelly-Belly. She eats lots of hay – and she's here to stay. And... *(gives up on composing)* I agreed with the communications director that it was the best entry but I thought we should massage the messaging a tiny bit. Because the original line was something about Nelly going away - to Taipei, Malay, Bombay – you get the picture. I don't think the poem should promote the idea of Matara fleeing to warmer climes.

*KAREN in MATARA'S enclosure.*

KAREN: What did you think of the poem they read to you? That I'm pretty sure Romney actually wrote? *(MATARA makes a noise)* Yes, that's what I thought too. I think we can write a nicer poem for you, huh? Matara... you are... grey and graceful... *(KAREN thinks for a long moment)*... I just don't have the words.

ROMNEY: This poetry contest has been a bloody debacle right from the word go.

KAREN: One of the kids gave this to me yesterday and asked me to read it to you. *(reading)* The First Annual Blow My Big Top Circus. By Jennifer D. It happens in a meadow. There will be stations or booths where kids can eat ice cream and the animals can eat bugs or small frozen rodents like they find tasty. There will be a music area. You can play chimes or bells or whistles and see if it makes the animals dance. And there will be no fences, no bars, no cages. At the end of the

circus I will call all the animals back to the main tent and if they don't come back...they don't come back.

If they don't come back, they don't come back.

ROMNEY: I made a number of presentations at corporate retreats. It was about raising the profile of the zoo in the business community, helping them see us as a resource. It was also about finding some high rollers. And yes, that's where I met him.

KAREN: Wendell, who found out more about the river in a year than I have known all my life, said it flows east not west. But in the dream I had that night it was somehow effortless to make it across the ocean in a river boat ark. In the dream there is no flooding or rain. Maybe there are favourable trade winds that help push us into warmer waters. We get to a patch of jungle, with soupy soft air and sunshine. And we never come back.

ROMNEY: Yes – Benson! He was the big old sugar daddy!

KAREN: From then on I dreamed about this every night.

WENDELL: I am an environmental engineer and yet no one thought it was worth paying attention to my observations about the river. I told Romney – I thought she would have more influence than me.

ROMNEY: I don't recall. *(listening)* What?

KAREN: Was I playing God– or Noah? I know you're making fun of me but I don't care.

ROMNEY: Okay, okay - it was me! Me – with Benson. I didn't know the webcam was functioning!

---

WENDELL: June 10. I go home to my little apartment after my shift. Even though the interior is painfully bright with morning sunshine my mind is ...not. Another day without sleep piled on top of a night without sleep. I phone work and say I won't be there tonight. I have to write my thesis proposal. I have five days –

ROMNEY: Ten days to the gala.

KAREN: Three weeks till Romney's contract is done.

ROMNEY: All I have to do is totally crush this gala and I'm pretty sure they'll offer me a permanent position.

*KAREN with MATARA*

KAREN: Mom says she's going to "blow a gasket" if I don't take a day off. She wants me to go with her to a yoga retreat in Mexico. I can't leave you right now. And you can't leave either. But we can still go around the world.

*KAREN and MATARA begin a lumbering walk through the zoo. We hear animal noises and see shadows or silhouettes representing the animals.*

KAREN: Look, Matara, your favorite owl. Hello, Derek...

*They walk a little further and stop to see the zebras.*

Jakarta...Juba, look who's here.

*A longer walk.*

Here we are at the ocean, eh? Waves crashing against the rocks and the shiny seals climbing up on the rocks.

*KAREN'S radio squawks.*

ROMNEY: *(voice-over)* Karen?

KAREN: Karen here.

ROMNEY: *(V.O.)* Where's Matara?

KAREN: She's off display right now.

ROMNEY: *(V.O.)* I have a family here that's hoping to see her.

KAREN: We're on a walk.

ROMNEY: *(V.O.)* Where are you?

KAREN: Tell them to go and see the new tree frog exhibit.

ROMNEY: *(V.O.)* One of these people is a potential donor who would like to buy Matara's latest paintings and top that up with a few grand. I think that's worth ten minutes of--

KAREN: *turns off her walkie-talkie* Come on. We can say hello to the hippopotamus, the elk, bison, yak, Sichuan takin, red Kangaroo, red-necked wallaby, two-toed sloth, giant anteaters, black and white ruffed lemurs, ring-tailed lemurs, chimpanzees, black-tailed prairie dogs, Siberian tigers, arctic foxes, brown bears, grizzly bears, polar bears, harp seals, harbour seals, wolverines, and miniature donkeys. Zebras, warthogs, meerkats, and thirty-five flamingos.

I could go on. Mom says this is my party trick. But it feels more like carrying the whole zoo around in my head.

*KAREN and MATARA walk down to the river.*

The river is so high – it’s almost up to the jogging path! I’d like to pretend we’re somewhere else except that the freeway is a few hundred yards away. We’re not wandering the jungles of southeast Asia. We’re in the middle of a city.

*MATARA makes rumbling noises. Stops, refusing to go with the walk.*

Come. Come! What is it? Mattie?

*MATARA lets loose with an ear-splitting trumpet. She repeats the noise again and again until she is seemingly exhausted. When she finally stops, KAREN attempts to comfort her, stroking and whispering.*

KAREN: What is it, my love? How can I help you?

-----  
*Sounds of the zoo shutting down for the night. WENDELL does his night patrol.*

WENDELL: The arctic fox. During the day he runs around and around and around on a track. It’s good to see him rest now.

I stare at Derek, the large snowy owl. He stares back.

The American eagle sleeps on a perch. His feathers are straggly and dull. His wing has been amputated so he’d be dead if he hadn’t been rescued.

KAREN: I worked with Matara for twenty-one years, at least six hours a day, five days a week, roughly fifty weeks of the year. I bet I spent more time with her than you have with your kids. I knew every wrinkle and sound and smell—I knew when she was in distress.

WENDELL: The Siberian tiger, accustomed to ranging across mountain passes and the barren steppes of Eastern Russia, has bedded down for the night. I make a game for myself of trying to spot him in the semi-darkness. Tiger, tiger burning bright. Ahh, there he is.

KAREN: I tell Doc I don't think it would be a bad idea to have Matara examined by some other vets. I can't believe I'm sort of agreeing with the Wildwatch guys but I feel like we do need to give Matara every opportunity to - I feel like that may be what Matara wants. Doc Clara looks at me. "Aha – so now you can read her mind?"

WENDELL: In her presentation Romney pointed out that many of the animals have a greatly increased life expectancy here at the zoo. She used Marek, the Siberian tiger, as an example of an animal who would likely be dead by now in the wild. And then says, with a little chuckle, that "frankly, she's pretty sure that Marek prefers the alternative." To be alive in his diorama.

KAREN: June 12<sup>th</sup>. I try to get a meeting with the director of the zoo. He's not free till next week so I send an email. Because I've done some research and there's a doctor, a special kind of veterinarian, who goes into zoos and treats animals for mental illness. Cause Matara is not herself. She's not interested in her enrichment activities, she's not eating well. And I can tell from the imprints in her bed of sand that she's not sleeping well. I include the link to this guy's website.

WENDELL: Most people I meet here believe that death is the very worst thing that can happen, Vincent. I suppose you would agree.

Marek's yellow eyes are wide open and glowering. I find myself whispering...try not to dwell on it.

KAREN: Doc Clara gives me the news: the zoo is not willing to bring in this specialist to help Matara. She says they're sorry. They can't reconcile the cost with the perceived benefit which is a risk and possibly even an illusion.

WENDELL: No, strictly speaking checking on the animals was not part of my job. But I wanted to see if there were any signs of restlessness. Many animals can sense natural disasters, like storms, hurricanes, what have you. I felt in my bones there was a crisis coming. (*listening*) No. Because their natural instincts were suppressed!

KAREN: (to MATARA) I find myself thinking of Nirvana, the elephant sanctuary. Where there's lush greenery and big sloppy mud holes and endless sunshine. There are eighty-five other elephants there and... some of them even come from exactly the same place you did. I start to imagine you there. And now I can't stop. I go round and round or back and forth in the same groove. Mom says I persevere.

---

WENDELL: June 15. The mountain streams have rushed down to add their voices to the river, which is very dangerous right now. Those who have worked at the zoo much longer than me say that every year there is some threat of a flood. One spring there was even a little water in the guest services building for a day or two, but still they say there is nothing to worry about. No one seems to be concerned but me. (beat) Today I inform my advisor that I will not be meeting the deadline for my thesis draft. She reminds me that I will owe more tuition. I remind her that I am already working full-time and sending money home to my aunt and there is nothing to spare. I tell her about the raging river and my belief that it will soon flow over the banks. A disaster that is...foreseen. I see it, feel it, I know. She hands me a tissue. Apparently I am weeping.

KAREN: Yes, it was me who decided Matara was too sick to do her public appearances and no, I didn't "consult" anyone. I talked with the other keepers who help look after Matara and then I just did it.

ROMNEY: I called Benson, the guy from the corporate team-building session, which went very well though no one seems to remember that now. He was mad for elephants and honestly, a bit mad for me, too. He bought ten tickets to the gala!

WENDELL: I think perhaps the art of accepting death is like the art of predicting the weather. You know winter will come, you just don't know when. (listening) The only possible conclusion is that it was Romney. Why would I lie? (listening) Romney says... she was unreceptive to my advances?

WENDELL laughs.

---

KAREN: Good afternoon and welcome to the elephant talk. My name is Karen and ...Nelly is resting right now and won't be joining us. But maybe you'd still like to hear a bit about her? She is a 35 year old Asian elephant and she has lived here at the Zoo for most of her life. I have known Nelly for most of my life, too, because the first time I came to the zoo I was... *(pointing to someone in the audience)* about your age... And now I am Nelly's keeper, her family. She's my family too. *(pause)* I have already spent more time with Nelly than I have with my own parents...

*ROMNEY rehearses a speech.*

ROMNEY: Welcome to this year's Summer Solstice Gala. My name is Romney Underwood and I have a chart here that will perhaps help you understand our visioning plan going forward.

*She gestures toward her imaginary power point.*

KAREN: When I was a kid I wasn't allowed to have pets. Finally I got a rabbit because Mom bought her for me. I called her Bunny. She didn't really do much but sit in her cage. But I loved her all the same.

WENDELL: Once again, Romney wanted my "opinion."

ROMNEY: Let's start at the bottom just so you get a sense of – look, of course each and every one of these creatures is just as valuable as the next. God sees the little sparrow fall and all that. I mean, if you're into that. I'm a Buddhist, I mean I am...trying to be a Buddhist but all the Catholic doctrine was imprinted so strongly with each smack of the ruler from Sister Josephine that even years later – fuck!

KAREN: When Bunny was about two years old she got sick. And no matter what we did she just got sicker. On our last trip to see the vet I begged her to give Bunny some more medicine so she'd live longer. The vet said: I know that's what you want. Is that what Bunny wants? We left Bunny at the vet's that day and I never saw her again. Because I asked Bunny what she wanted. And she told me.

ROMNEY: What I'm trying to say is, I'm trying to forestall your reactions to the sense of hierarchy here in the chart. It has nothing to do with the value of the little lime-coloured gecko versus the Siberian tiger but it does clearly reflect the level of interest on the part of the public. The so-called marketability? Yes, I suppose.

KAREN: And now I have asked Nelly what she wants. *(a question from her "elephant talk" audience)* Pardon? *(beat)* No, she's resting. She's just not feeling very well *(beat)* Yes of course! She was *rescued!* Look - the whole point of us being here is to try to make you understand – to create some empathy. Did you know that as many as 35,000 elephants are slaughtered every year across Africa? An elephant is killed in Tanzania pretty much every fifteen minutes - for its ivory. That's like - that would be like - making jewelry out of your bones!

ROMNEY: Though I would stress that really this is more about creating, maintaining that balance between... No, this is by way of saying that in addition to being a kind of public institution. Correction. Not *kind* of a public institution...*slips off her jacket and unbuttons her blouse* – this *is* a public trust and as such, must serve the public. So...here at the bottom of the chart...*slips off her blouse to reveal a sexy bra*...we do have in our holdings here a den of snakes and a family of guinea pigs. But surely you can appreciate...*strikes a vampy pose* that these creatures are less of a draw for the general public than some of the large mammals. *(slowly starts to slip off her skirt)* Like the tigers, the cheetahs, the giraffes, the hippo and...

KAREN: *(listening to a question)* Doctor Doolittle?

ROMNEY: *(pointing at the chart as her skirt drops to the floor)* Top of the heap, ladies and gentlemen: Nelly the Asian elephant. Everyone knows you can't really call yourself a zoo without an elephant. And now, I am thrilled to announce that we may be able to - we are planning to – we most certainly will get...dolphins – penguins-maybe even a rhinoceros! *(picks up her clothes and smiles)*

WENDELL: You... are a Buddhist? I say this without thinking. I may have offended –

ROMNEY: I think I rocked his world just a tiny bit.

WENDELL: I am embarrassed for her.

ROMNEY: Wendell doesn't think the notion of a hierarchy amongst the animals at the zoo can be forestalled –

WENDELL: I tell her I have to go. I have to check on Matara - and the river.

ROMNEY: I can tell he's shy. I make small talk. I wonder what Matara's name means. I also wonder what Wendell means. He is so not a Wendell.

WENDELL: Matara means magnificent creation. It's also a city in Sri Lanka.

ROMNEY: He's gorgeous but he can be a bit pedantic. I suggest that instead of Karen's elephant talk Wendell could give a presentation about growing up in Africa. He says it depends...

WENDELL: I ask Romney if she could mention my concerns about the river to the head of the zoo. I was hoping she would advocate --

ROMNEY: For instance, there's a very famous gorilla sanctuary in Rwanda - he says he's been there.

WENDELL: I say attention must be paid to the river - and to the protesters. Both are rising, rising up. She promises she will use her influence. She makes a promise.

ROMNEY: Speaking of which -

WENDELL: She moves in, a lioness with a little bit of her last kill still stuck between her teeth.

ROMNEY: I kiss him.

WENDELL: I back away. I say: "I don't wish to pursue this."

ROMNEY: Are you kidding me?

*ROMNEY starts dressing.*

WENDELL: I try to hand her the scarf that she has thrown at me during her presentation. The scarf smells of...meat?

ROMNEY: I know in my heart of hearts that this is a pattern with me. That my wild instincts are not always an expression of my higher self. But my ego is bruised so I say: fuck you.

WENDELL: Not at this time, thank you. Even I am surprised.

ROMNEY: If you don't count the time in Grade five when I chased Jason Clifford behind the school and he didn't want to kiss me --

WENDELL: There is something wrong. My heart is pounding and I am suddenly sweating -

ROMNEY: My intellect can rationalize but my animal self is raging. My brain is flooded with the chemicals of desire. Adrenalin surges and my sweat suddenly smells acrid, metallic. My breath is rank. It smells gamey -

WENDELL: I thought I was better, Vincent. But nature can't break through.

ROMNEY: A strip tease? I most certainly did not. But I did sort of insinuate that I could get him fired. Wendell laughed and laughed -

WENDELL: She growled at me. I swear this is true.

ROMNEY: Yes - yes - I remember now. I did promise to mention the river and the protesters - I don't know - maybe I sent an email or something. *(listening)* Oh. Well I thought I'd sent an email or at least mentioned it in passing. *(listening)* Quid pro quo? The sex? That's really offensive.

---

KAREN: I walk Matara around her yard. A group of junior high kids come by to watch. I don't know where their teacher is. One of the boys says: "what the fuck is that?" His friend says: It's a fucking elephant you retard. No, I mean the fat chick. Ha-ha - be nice, asshole. Be a nice asshole - what are you, a faggot? Hey! Hey you!" Do some tricks!" That's the tall one wearing the hockey jersey - he's mad cause there was no elephant at the elephant talk. I say this isn't a circus - we don't force Matara to perform. He stuffs some garbage through the fence. One of the other boys - the little guy with a big mouth - has kind of a plastic machine gun, he shoots water into the enclosure. Matara likes that, to be honest. Big mouth

says to his buddies that he's making a mudhole for the elephant. Then the little bastard comes too close. I grab his water gun and point it back at him. He points his phone at me while I spray them all. And yell. So much for empathy.

ROMNEY: What the hell –

KAREN: Romney shoos away the kids. Says “Fuck’s sake, Karen – what are you doing?”

ROMNEY: My job was to sell this place and all the animals in it.

KAREN: And my job was to protect Matara!

ROMNEY: I was pimping myself out non-stop but the forces of freak were piled up against me. The Wild Watch protestors and the media and the Concerned Parents and even the other staff here at the zoo.

KAREN: Usually I just walk away from Romney—

ROMNEY: Karen’s meltdown ended up on YouTube –

KAREN: But I guess I’m not done yelling.

ROMNEY: Karen just wanted the public to go away and stop bothering her and her elephant. She didn’t seem to get that all of this—the conservation, the education, the species survival program – it all cost big bucks. We needed the public’s money and yes, goddamit, they had to be “entertained”!

KAREN: Get the fuck away from me – from us!

ROMNEY: This is what I was dealing with. There were no panda bears or penguins or dolphins. But we did have a goddamn elephant! So –

KAREN: Then I hear Romney’s going to set off fireworks during the gala.

ROMNEY: Oh - and The Wild Watch nutbars found a bunch of other vets who were willing to come in – pro bono - and assess Matara’s ability to travel.

KAREN: Fireworks! The animals will think it’s the end of the world!

ROMNEY: The plan was to keep bringing in vets until they got the answer they wanted.

KAREN: Noah's ark was the end of the world, wasn't it? I ask Mom. Creation, uncreation, re-creation. Genesis! she barks, like saying it louder will make more sense.

WENDELL: The sky is dark. The clouds obscure the moon. The protesters are no longer a small ragged band. Their numbers have doubled in the last day or two. I leave a message for Romney. The protesters have a plan for the night of the gala –

ROMNEY: *(dismissive)* Yeah – yeah –

WENDELL: Jeremiah and his group refer to it as an “initiative” called “Project Bigmouth.” Then they realize I am listening in the darkness beyond the fire.

ROMNEY: I have a rash all over my body. Maybe I'm allergic to animals - wouldn't that be hilarious. Or maybe I'm shedding my skin.

WENDELL: Jeremiah says “this is war!” I am dumbfounded. *This is war?*

ROMNEY: June 17. I take Benson on a tour – just after closing and before Wendell does his first round. I have a joint and a thermos full of margueritas.

KAREN: I write up an official complaint –

WENDELL: I come to my shack for a break – Romney is there with her alpha dog –

KAREN: About the fireworks – about Romney –

WENDELL: Smoking drugs –

ROMNEY: Benson was going to save the zoo – he was going to save me –

KAREN: I say from now on I want to speak for Matara –

ROMNEY: The zoo is fantastic when you're a little bit stoned. We should have a special thing – Stoner Night at the Zoo. The owls look so judgemental, don't you think?  
*(hoots at the owls)*

KAREN: I want to...rescue her.

ROMNEY: I do my gala presentation for Benson.

KAREN: June 18<sup>th</sup>. All the animals in the zoo are talking to me. Now suddenly everyone wants to come with us on the ark.

ROMNEY: He was going to make the zoo his legacy project!

KAREN: There is no need for animals to go two by two. We are going to a place where there will be many friends and mates.

ROMNEY: By this time Karen had completely lost her shit.

KAREN: I'm going to bring lots of birds because they can find land. Did you know birds can see magnetic fields?

ROMNEY: She met with the director of the zoo and said either Romney goes or I go – and I'll take the animals with me. Certi-fucking – fiable. You know what? Maybe it was Karen who opened Matara's gate on the night of the flood.

-----  
*KAREN with MATARA.*

KAREN: I have been ordered to stay home. Management thinks I'm "showing signs of stress." And they want me to "regain my perspective."

Of course Jim and Brenda and Amy will take care of you. They'll feed you and scrub your feet and take you for your walk and – I want to take you for a walk down to the river. And then just keep going -- south.

*KAREN sits by MATARA, who sways back and forth. KAREN puts her head in her hands. MATARA reaches out to KAREN and encircles her shoulders with her trunk.*

KAREN We'll have to leave in the middle of the night. I'll put a blanket over your shoulders and we'll start our "procession" through the river valley. It's dark. But maybe there is glow tape on the trees along the way to mark the path. The trees are part of this, they're happy to help. There's an artificial palm in the monkey

enclosure - and I think I'll transplant it to the boat for our journey so that everyone feels more at home.

ROMNEY: June 19<sup>th</sup> Benson wants to have a private session with our elephant. Why not? I don't think he wants to ride her in a parade. He just wants a little...access. A special privilege. He's also interested in buying another elephant for the zoo! I know, I know – most northern zoos are getting rid of their elephants. A lot of people don't even want us to have one elephant, never mind two. But wouldn't it be good for Nelly to have company? And honestly if something happens to Nelly the zoo would have a back-up elephant. That doesn't sound right – I mean a contingency plan. Whatever - you know what I mean. The director of animal care is not enthused. In fact she shuts me down completely.

KAREN: We make our way through the ravine and then we walk along the valley that was carved out during the ice ages for our journey.

*MATARA makes an unusual noise.*

KAREN: Matara...?

*We hear a representation of MATARA'S voice: a combination of natural sounds (trumpeting, rumbling) and music.*

---

WENDELL: June 19<sup>th</sup>. Karen and I listen to the news on a radio in my shack. City council will not permit Matara to be examined by the so-called veterinarian flying squad recommended by Wild Watch. The announcer sounds excited when he asks his colleague to "tell us about some rather apocalyptic weather..."

*Sounds of rain.*

KAREN: Matara wants to go to Nirvana.

WENDELL: I beg your pardon.

KAREN: She told me –

WENDELL: Matara...?

KAREN: Just when I most need to be here - they're making me taking time off.

WENDELL You have been working too hard.

KAREN: I know my shifts are covered and Romney's doing the elephant talk but....

*WENDELL nods.*

KAREN: She *is* lonely. She appreciates everything that we do but...she feels very tired. Sad? Maybe just tired. It's hard to tell. The – pictures, the images - are very similar. She's sick of protein pellets. She's having bad dreams. I thought I might spend the night in her enclosure – I hate to ask you this but I wonder if you might be able to sneak me in -

WENDELL: Yes.

KAREN: Really? I don't want to get you in trouble –

WENDELL: Come back about eight o'clock. But it won't be possible tomorrow night.

KAREN: What's –

WENDELL: The gala fundraiser.

KAREN: But maybe you could check on her.

WENDELL: I always do.

KAREN: A little more often than usual. (*beat*) She was born in a teak forest. She does remember her mother. Isn't that amazing?

WENDELL: *nods and smiles*

KAREN: I wonder if she would recognize any of the other elephants at the sanctuary. Some of them are from the same area where she was found. I'd love to take her there –

WENDELL: But surely she isn't well enough.

KAREN: No, of course not. No. But...I dream about it.

WENDELL: I will look in on her at least once an hour.

KAREN: She dreams about Cheerio. She wonders why she never saw his body after he died. She would like to visit his bones.

*WENDELL smiles to himself.*

KAREN: I love her - everyone loves her - but it's not enough.

WENDELL: I'm sorry.

KAREN: What do you think about all this? You never say.

WENDELL: I'm sure it is complicated.

KAREN: You're the only human besides Mom who...never mind, that's stupid. I'm tired, I've started to say things I shouldn't... to you and to Romney and to the director which is why I might lose my job and- please tell me what you think!

*A long pause.*

WENDELL: I think that it is a good deal of fuss about one creature. I think that the world is full of suffering and I am truly amazed about the focus on a single elephant, beloved though she is.

KAREN: Oh.

WENDELL: This institution is staffed by intelligent, compassionate professionals who care deeply about the animals. But I am not a supporter of zoos.

KAREN: How do you, why do you work here?

WENDELL: The zoo exists. Someone needs to watch over the animals at night. It's an important job.

KAREN: But if you don't want -

WENDELL: An important job I'm not sure I will be doing for much longer. It has been a great pleasure working with you. Getting to know you.

KAREN: Why are you saying goodbye like I'm not going to see you again?

WENDELL: There's a change coming.

*KAREN just looks at WENDELL, then nods.*

KAREN: I'll be back after hours.

WENDELL: Of course. I should be looking for my tiger by now. He hides but I always find him.

KAREN: Hope it stops raining.

WENDELL: Yes. Or it will soon be time to build an ark.

-----

KAREN: We get to the boat about one in the morning. Mom is there, with an afghan on her lap, to keep Matara company until I can get back. I drive my hearse back and forth between the zoo and the river boat – the ark – four times. I bring three monkeys, the lemurs, the wallaby, and the armadillo. Although all of them have agreed to the plan, they're nervous and chittery –chatterly now that the night has arrived. We have to hurry. It's almost dawn by the time we're loaded. Derek the large snowy owl sits on the highest point of the boat and scowls. But I know he'll be looking out for big rocks and tree trunks in the water like we agreed. The

sky is getting pink as we push off. We start to move slowly down the river toward the ocean far away...

-----

*Darkness. A whistling call. Silence. Some chattering which builds into a chorus, only to be superseded by the roar of a big cat. Silence except for murmuring. More birdcall. Hoots, chipchipcharoo. Call and response. Nickering and snorting. There is no sound from MATARA.*

-----

*Sounds of a distant thunder storm and fast-running water.*

ROMNEY: Just before people are scheduled to arrive, the rain stops. The zoo looks beautiful. There are twinkling lights everywhere. Acrobats, jugglers, tumblers – even the catering staff is dressed in costumes. The silent auction raises nearly one hundred thousand dollars.

WENDELL: Jeremiah has arranged for the television celebrity to be here for the gala. But his plane is delayed.

ROMNEY: There must be two hundred of them outside the gate. Chanting, drumming, hauling around that paper mache elephant. Was this the big plan that Wendell was warning me about? I find myself wishing for a magical tsunami wave from the river to wash them all away.

KAREN: Tonight Mom gives me a hug and asks me if I still want to hear the story of Noah's ark.

ROMNEY: It wasn't personal, you have to understand. I viewed it as a business meeting. This was me - landing the big fish - Benson is richer than God. He totally understands the politics around the idea of getting another elephant - he said he'd also be quite happy to sponsor the acquisition of some penguins. Or whatever a few million bucks can buy. I made the announcement and everyone at the gala burst into applause. And afterwards -

WENDELL: *(on the phone)* Matara got out – she didn't go far but - her breathing does not sound good.

KAREN: I'm on my way.

ROMNEY: I thought the least I could do was give him a little up-close and personal time. With me. And with Matara. Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.

---

*The inquiry.*

ROMNEY: Look, I couldn't have worked there much longer, anyway. The contract was only ever supposed to be for four months and although at first I had hoped that might lead to a permanent position...

KAREN: All I can tell you is that I dreamed this.

ROMNEY: I was developing – I don't know how to describe this. Okay: there are bumps on my skull that were never there before. Maybe something vestigial...

KAREN: Metaphysical? I don't really know what that means.

WENDELL: I have decided to abandon the thesis. I will study literature and sociology. And anthropology. And history, even though they say it is normally written by the victors.

ROMNEY: I felt wild – bloody-minded–ruled by instinct. I suppose it's possible I may have opened the gate. I had already pinched a set of keys in anticipation of... I was full of champagne and light-headed with the feeling of success. Or maybe that was lust.

KAREN: It's almost like I made it happen.

ROMNEY: I guess I'll run away, tail between my legs. So to speak.

KAREN: I have applied to work at an elephant sanctuary– in Africa.

ROMNEY: But first I have to sort out this...issue. I might need some surgery. I definitely need to live in my head for a while, instead of...

WENDELL: I will go home once more and visit your bones, Vincent. Then we can rest.

KAREN: The night of the flood? I think Matara was trying to get to the river.

-----  
*Sounds of a storm. A collage of panicked animal noises, fragments of voices, reporting from the scene of the flooding, etc. A wave of sound rising and falling. KAREN goes to MATARA.*

KAREN: Hello my pretty chum...

WENDELL: *(on the phone)* Hello? Yes, it's Wendell Katuri. Some low-lying areas of the zoo have started to flood.

ROMNEY: Things get a little wild.

WENDELL: The emergency response teams come right away. Nearly everyone who works at the zoo hurries in to help. But it is a difficult situation. An unprecedented event. We move some animals to higher ground: the giraffes, the bears and the older primates.

ROMNEY: That little shit from Wild Watch is standing at the gates of the zoo holding forth to a couple of reporters.

WENDELL: The water is rising in each of the enclosures. If the animals are not released they will drown. But if they are freed, they will actually have access to the river. To swim or be washed away.

KAREN: I don't like the sound of your breathing.

ROMNEY: Operation Bigmouth was postponed but our little shit-disturber is still on the case.

WENDELL: The elk, moose, deer, zebras and donkeys are moved into horse trailers.

KAREN: Are you warm enough?

WENDELL: There are harbour seals swimming down the river. The hippopotamus is crashing against his gate – he would like to swim in the river, too. The aquariums are too heavy to move and there is no time to drain the tanks. The fish will have to be sacrificed –

KAREN: There will be a lot of mud tomorrow. You'll like that, won't you? *(a long beat)* I'm sorry you're still here. Maybe I'm sorry you were ever here in the first place.

WENDELL: I help rescue some emus and cormorants as they cannot fly. I open their enclosure and I am the one who feels liberated. They look bewildered but they seem to know: the show is over.

*KAREN and MATARA begin to walk. While the chaos of the panicked animals is all around them, they seem to be in a different reality.*

KAREN: I put a blanket over your shoulders and we start our walk – our “procession” - through the river valley. It's dark. But maybe there is glow tape on the trees along the way to mark the path. The trees are part of this, they're happy to help. We make our way through the ravine and then we walk along the valley that was carved out during the ice ages for our journey.

WENDELL: I release the owls into the night. All of them. I feel better than I have in some time.

KAREN: We get to the boat about one in the morning. Mom is there, with an afghan on her lap, to keep you company until I can get back with the others. The sky is getting light as the river boat just barely makes it under the bottom of the bridge. Then we're off. Floating. On and on and on...

*ROMNEY encounters WENDELL.*

ROMNEY: I knew the river was high but I had no idea –

WENDELL: I told you. The rain and the run-off from the mountains –

ROMNEY: But it's so sudden –

WENDELL: Not really. There are many very efficient people here helping with the rescue.  
You can go home -

ROMNEY: Are you kidding? I want to be here–

WENDELL: In case someone – or something – dies you wanted to be the first to spread the news.

ROMNEY: Oh, come on -

WENDELL: You have already been immortalized.

ROMNEY: What?

WENDELL: The web camera in Matara's enclosure.

ROMNEY: But it's not working –

WENDELL: Last night I made sure it was repaired so that Karen could have her peace of mind.

*ROMNEY takes a few seconds to absorb this.*

ROMNEY: I was doing my job -

WENDELL: Really?

ROMNEY: - trying to ensure the future of this zoo.

WENDELL: How is that?

ROMNEY: He wanted to see Matara!

WENDELL: Matara is dying.

*KAREN strokes MATARA and stares off.*

KAREN: Just after we push off and start to move slowly down the river toward the ocean far away, I scratch your lovely big ear flap and whisper. Can you feel the breezes from Sri Lanka? What's that? (*listening*) You say – "I remember it as Ceylon." You do the most beautiful dance on the deck of the boat. Most people would never dream an elephant could be so light on her feet. Someone somewhere is playing a piano and you spin around - very, very slowly.

It's sunny and beautiful when we arrive and walk down the ramp to the beach. Food first. You pull mangos off the trees. Drink from a waterfall. Then walk into the jungle. I used to dream that I'd go with you.

*MATARA is still.*

I wish I could tell you...every day when I looked into your eyes...to be in your presence...it was a wonder. (*a long moment*) It was...

KAREN: There are no words.

*Silence. THE END*