ANIMAL KINGDOM CRUSADERS

TOWN&COUNTRY

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RHINO *RESCUE* MIRACLE

UMA THURMAN AND T&C *WITNESS* ONE OF AFRICA'S *GREAT* STORIES OF HOPE

BY KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA

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With a team of wildlife experts, Uma Thurman moves a white rhino threatened by poachers to safety.

A HEAVY PRICE
A black rhino from South Africa, just after his release into Botswana's Moremi Game Reserve. Its big horn, if well shaped and intact, could command $750,000 on the black market.

AFRICA'S ARK

ROAD WARRIOR
Uma Thurman, in the chase vehicle on our way to a rhino capture in South Africa's Timbavati Game Reserve; the animals would be moved to Botswana. "It's Operation Noah," says Thurman.

PURDEY VEST (WORN THROUGHOUT, $617); **THE ROW** SWEATER (WORN THROUGHOUT, $1,190); **RALPH LAUREN COLLECTION** SHIRT (WORN THROUGHOUT, $1,295) AND PANTS ($890); **BRUNELLO CUCINELLI** GLOVES ($895); **PERSOL** SUNGLASSES (WORN THROUGHOUT, $280).

RHINOS HAVE LIVED ON THIS EARTH FOR *MILLIONS OF YEARS*, BUT WILDLIFE EXPERTS ESTIMATE THEY MAY BE GONE IN JUST 10—*POACHED* TO EXTINCTION. ONE AFRICAN COUNTRY—AND A PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNER—IS EMPLOYING A *RADICAL SOLUTION*. TEAM T&C AND ACTRESS *UMA THURMAN* WITNESS *A CONSERVATION* MIRACLE IN THE MAKING.

MONITOR MAN
Wilderness Safaris' Michael Fitt tracks released rhinos with his team to check on their health and whereabouts. The animals can travel a dozen miles a day.

COMRADES IN ARMS
Thurman with veterinarian Peter Rogers and the dart gun with which he will immobilize the rhinos from a helicopter.

POLO RALPH LAUREN JACKET (WORN THROUGHOUT, $365) AND PANTS ($145).

OH, BABY
A 15-month-old white rhino bull being walked into a container for his journey to Botswana. His mom was loaded first.

TEAM RHINO
At the Mombo Camp bomas, where translocated rhinos get used to their new home. *From left:* Nicholas Proust, Pitso, Fitt, Map Ives, George Njunja, and "Sixteen."

By Klara Glowczewska
Photographs by Alexei Hay

We have been driving for a half hour along a rutted, sandy path in Timbavati Game Reserve, a private conservancy within South Africa's Greater Kruger National Park. All around us stretches yellowing early winter grassland dotted with acacia trees and thorn bushes, the so-called lowveld of northeastern Limpopo Province. I'm riding shotgun, squeezing between my feet an open container bristling with bottles, syringes, and vials of potent veterinary drugs, as well as a pulse oximeter, for monitoring the vital signs of rhinoceroses.

In the very back of the Land Cruiser truck, standing next to a spare tire, coils of thick rope, and a four-foot-long dart gun, is actress Uma Thurman. She bounded up there with ease, all five-foot-eleven of her, at the start of the chase—almost, I couldn't help thinking, the way her badass character in the *Kill Bill* films would have. "I want to see better!" she said.

In *Kill Bill* she was bent on revenge. We are now on a mission of mercy—to help prevent "bloody murder." That's what Map Ives, Botswana's biblically bearded national rhino coordinator, riding in the back seat, calls what is happening these days in South Africa (and to some extent in neighboring Namibia): the ruthless slaughter by poachers of black and white rhinos for their horn. The "rhinocide," as Thurman calls it, has surged since 2008, when the prestige of rhino horn (which has been used for centuries in traditional Chinese medicine) began climbing rapidly among the rising rich in Vietnam, where it is thought to not only cure cancer but enhance virility, and where it also serves, ground to a powder, as a cocaine-like party drug. Approximately 4.5 of the prehistoric-looking animals are being killed every day, up from what seemed an already apocalyptic three per day at the end of 2014. "And that is just the corpses that we find," says Kester Vickery, who is at the wheel of our truck and whose South Africa–based company, Conservation Solutions, moves large wild mammals throughout Africa from areas of peril to more hospitable environments. "Others are in inaccessible areas."

Rhinos are often poached in a particularly gruesome way: Their faces are hacked off while they're still alive. "When poachers do that," Vickery says, "it means they don't know what they're doing. Horn is actually somewhat loose, and you can pry it off. But even if they know how to do that, they will kill the animal anyway—because the fewer rhinos there are, the more valuable the horn becomes."

As Ives never tires of saying, the people behind this "are the really bad guys—the international criminal syndicates involved in human trafficking, child and sex slavery, drugs, arms and ammo. It's a vicious, horrible enemy. And this is war."

The men doing the actual killing in the bush are largely foot soldiers, for whom even the crumbs of the black market trade are a bonanza. Today horn sells for as much as $35,000 a pound, making it one of the most valuable natural commodities on earth, worth more than gold. An intact, well-shaped horn will fetch between $750,000 and $1 million. At the present rate of poaching, both white rhinos, of which some 20,000 remain (officially "near threatened"), and black rhinos, which number only 4,500 in all of Africa (officially "critically endangered"), will be extinct by 2024. "It is *vital* that the media cover this," Vickery says. "We need people with passion. Without passion, there will be no rhinos left."

That's why we're here, as participants in a revolutionary effort to save them—translocating as many as possible from South Africa to Botswana, where they can be better protected. We will be in South Africa for three days, Botswana for five. "The beauty of these animals and the absurdity of their plight is so painful," says Thurman, a Golden Globe–winning actress (seen most recently in the NBC miniseries *The Slap*) who understands that a famous face is a proven way to attract attention to a cause. "I have lent myself to this. I'm here to help."

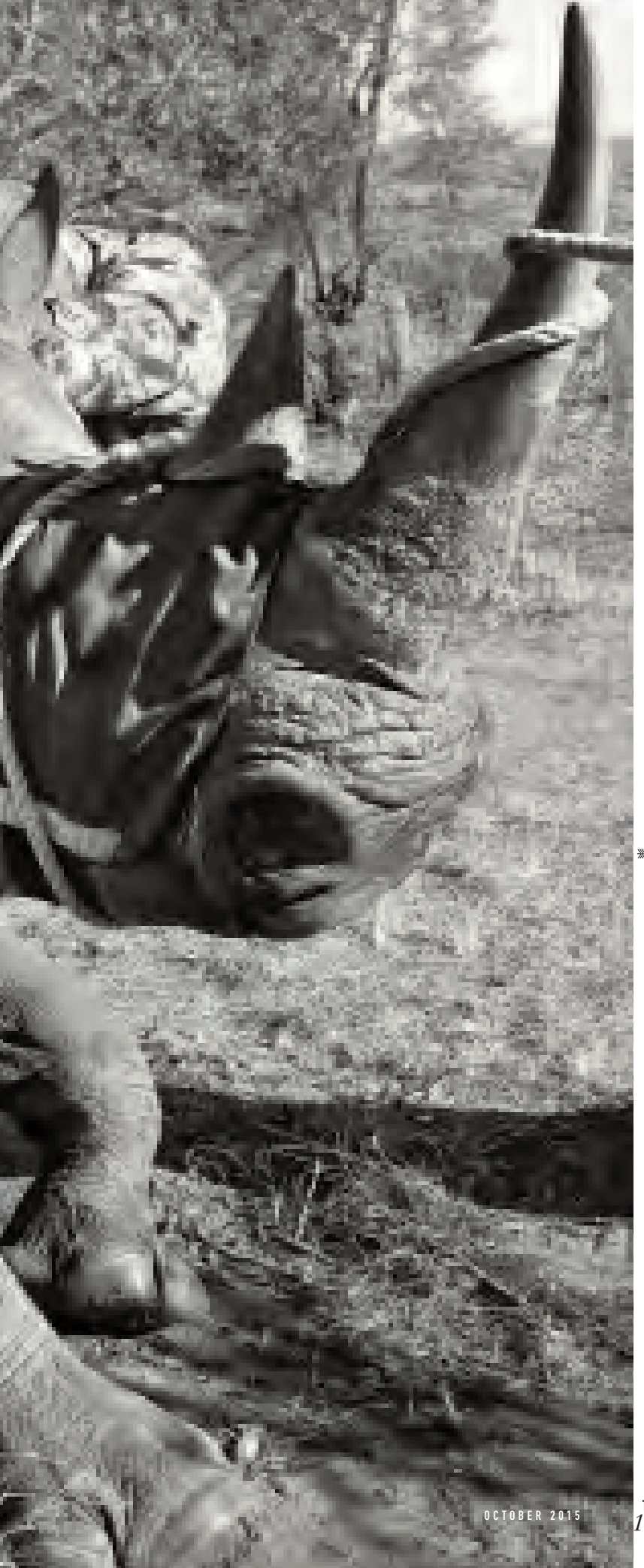
South Africa has 88 percent of Africa's remaining rhino population, which is why it is being hit especially hard. The country shares a long and porous border with Mozambique—think impoverished villages full of would-be poachers abutting the 220-mile length of Kruger National Park, full of wildlife. Kruger lost 10 percent of its rhinos last year. The rescue project we are following is being pioneered by the travel company Wilderness Safaris and the government of Botswana (which also shares a border with South Africa), specifically by Botswana's conservation-minded, Sandhurst-educated president, Ian Khama Seretse Khama, and his brother Tshekedi "T.K." Khama, the country's minister of environment, wildlife, and tourism. In late 2014, President Khama declared, uniquely in Africa, that the protection of his country's natural resources is the main mission of its military, the Botswana Defence Force (BDF). "Among the many things that means," Ives says, "is that if I see something suspicious, I just make a call and there's a BDF helicopter in the air within the hour."

"The rhino is a flagship species—big and exciting and fantastic. And its plight represents so much else—the fragility of life on this planet, the onslaught of man. If we can't save the rhino, what else can't we save? But if we can save it, what an inspiration that will be."

It's a radical move for a country that is still developing. Thirty percent of Botswana's GDP comes from its partnership with De Beers, whose diamond mines have helped lift the country from among the poorest in the world in the late 1960s and make it one with a middle-income economy—a rare African success story. But manpower and military aircraft are one thing; cash for the purchase and transport of rhinos (about $50,000 and $20,000, respectively) is another. That's where the private tourism companies come in, most notably the government's longtime partner, Botswana-based Wilderness ➳

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
Thurman and company give the white rhino cow we darted in Timbavati a helping hand. Ten months pregnant, she struggles to get back on her feet. *Opposite:* In the chase vehicle.

"It's a spiritual, surreal experience, to have subdued, without stress, such a prehistoric animal. To hear its deep breaths, to smell it, to touch its skin—even a rhino has soft bits. To see how delicate they really are, how vulnerable. There is the obvious excitement of it all, but also a quietness in the midst of all the panic."



Safaris, which began, in a small way, moving both white and black rhinos here back in 2000, trying to repopulate areas in the country where they had been poached to extinction in the 1970s. Ives has been involved with the project from the beginning.

"The debate about the best ways to deal long-term with this will rage on," says Keith Vincent, Wilderness Safaris' CEO. "People won't agree. But meantime, there will be no rhinos left. We have to do this *now*." Wilderness Safaris' senior management team—Vincent and Kai Collins, the group's environmental manager—is traveling with us, as is Ives, and they are proud of what they have already accomplished. A so-called "founder breeding population" of white rhinos is already in place, and after this year's translocations, one of black rhinos will be too. (Despite their names, both species are shades of gray, but with different muzzles. White rhinos have broad, flat ones, for grazing; black rhinos have more pointed ones, for browsing.) "As of this year, we will have moved 1 percent of the continent's remaining black rhinos to Botswana," Collins says.

For Thurman and me, both New Yorkers, the trip will be an important conservation mission, as well as the most adrenaline-charged safari imaginable—a wildlife version of military search-and-rescue.

The theoretical arc of salvation—logistically complex, costly, and sometimes dangerous—has three acts. Act I of translocation is capture: Rhinos in high-poaching areas are immobilized by a dart fired from a helicopter, loaded into specially designed steel containers, and carried on a flatbed truck to a South African quarantine station, where they spend 30 days in a guarded

boma, or wooden corral. Act II is transport: Back in the steel crates, they are flown from South Africa to northern Botswana, to the edge of the Okavango Delta, one of Africa's largest fenceless and roadless wilderness areas. Act III is their rerelease into the wild and subsequent lifelong monitoring. "There is no point bringing the animals here if we can't look after them properly," T.K. Khama says.

We're at the start of Act I, waiting in the Land Cruiser for the pilot and veterinarian in the helicopter ahead of us to find the appropriate rhino pair to capture. The translocation permit obtained from South African park authorities by the Botswana government (for which Wilderness Safaris is footing the bill) specifies that we'll be taking a female white rhino and a bull calf at least 15 months of age—old enough to handle the immobilizing drugs. Vickery describes his job as "hours of boredom interrupted by moments of sheer panic." And this, he says, "is the boring part."

Not in Thurman's or my world it isn't. We're in a chase vehicle—a first for me. The soundtrack is very special-ops—Vickery is on a crackling VHF ground-to-air radio, saying things like "Standing by… Negative… Confirm… Okay, I've got a visual…"—things I, for one, have heard only in movies. And what we're chasing is a helicopter. We can see it now and then in the distance ahead of us, a bright yellow bauble circling above the lowveld, then diving suddenly at an alarmingly steep angle for a better look, almost into the tops of the acacias and bushes. "Dead man's curve, slow and low," Vickery said earlier of the helicopter's roller-coaster-like search maneuvers, explaining why no one—Thurman and I had our hopes—would be hitching a ride. "If something goes wrong, it has neither the speed nor the lift to recover, and falls like a stone to the ground. I've lost two good friends. And a chopper almost crashed on top of me." Roger that.

Another first: We're about to literally manhandle a two-ton wild animal—as soon as the chopper spots the right mother-calf pair and Vickery gives the go-ahead for the operation to begin (the "sheer panic" part). "Come on, guys," he says into the radio, impatiently. "Don't you know what a rhino looks like?" A pause. He's listening. "Okay, let's go!"

The next 15 minutes unfold in a rapid series of stop-motion frames: the chopper, pitched at an almost 45-degree angle, low to the ground. Two rhinos running below it, the calf close to his mother's side. The vet onboard, Peter Rogers, perched precariously on the landing skids. A red-feathered dart flying through the air. And another. The animals slowing down. Vickery and team, in military-style olive jumpsuits, walking briskly toward them. Blindfolds placed over the animals' eyes. Ropes tied to rear legs.

Someone signals that we can come out of the vehicle. We stand a few feet from the rhinos. The cow, always darted first, is starting to collapse. Her hind legs go first. She is sitting a bit the way a dog would. "Goofed," Vickery says.

I'm thinking about M99, the immobilizing agent on the darts. Otherwise known as etorphine hydrochloride, it has, in pharma-speak, an analgesic potency approximately 1,000 to 3,000 times that of morphine. "Literally, a pinprick will kill you," Vickery told us. "So do not touch the dart. And do not touch the rhino where you see a wet patch from where the dart pierced the skin. But if you do get it on you and start to feel sleepy, tell us immediately. We have an antidote, but it is not a pleasant experience." Thurman responded with admirable aplomb: "Oh, so it's not a death sentence."

"I keep circling back to the idea of being willing to make an effort. So many of us feel that there is no point, that there are so many dire situations. But what I learned in Africa is that one must make an effort anyway. Because you just don't know. There is always hope."

TRUNK SHOW Thurman takes a brief respite from rhino work in the bush around Mombo Camp. The 110,000-acre private, protected conservancy was a hunting area only 17 years ago.

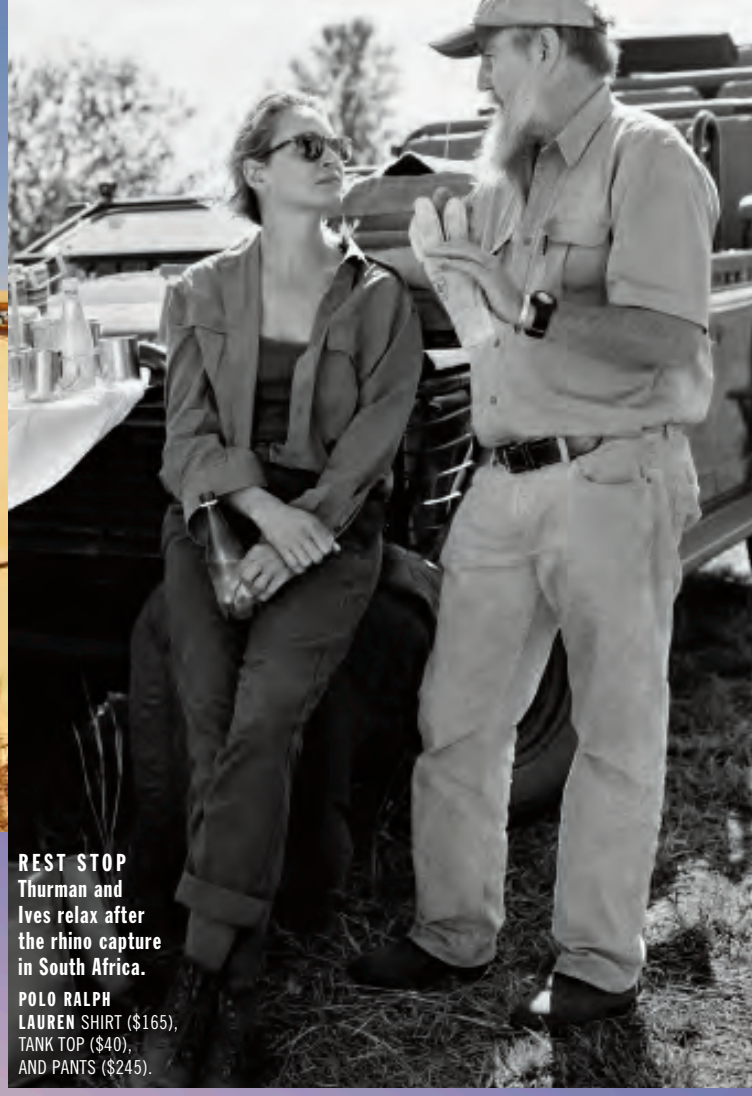
SOUTHPAW VINTAGE JUMPSUIT ($1,200); **POLO RALPH LAUREN** TANK TOP ($40) AND BELT ($195); **CHOPARD** WATCH (WORN THROUGHOUT, $5,520).

GUTTER

"We are fighting not just for the rhino but for the survival of the human species. We are absolutely dependent, as a species, on a pristine environment. You are kidding yourself if you think that we are not."

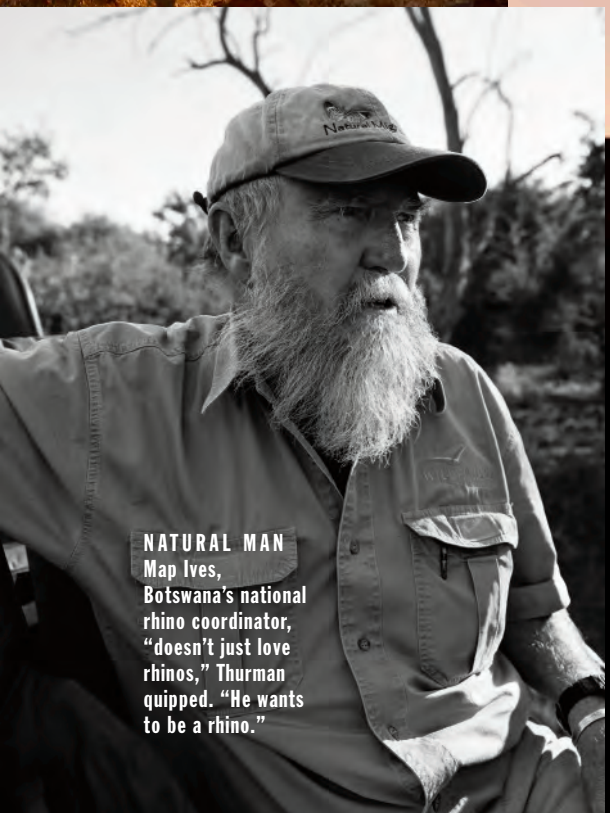
FIELD TRIP
Kester Vickery talks rhino facts with Thurman, his hand on the immobilized animal's horn in case it reawakens suddenly. Capture, he says, is "dynamic and unpredictable."
RALPH LAUREN COLLECTION CARGO PANTS (WORN THROUGHOUT, $1,595).

TICKET TO RIDE
Rhinos are gently tranquilized for transport in steel containers.



REST STOP
Thurman and Ives relax after the rhino capture in South Africa.

POLO RALPH LAUREN SHIRT ($165), TANK TOP ($40), AND PANTS ($245).



NATURAL MAN
Map Ives, Botswana's national rhino coordinator, "doesn't just love rhinos," Thurman quipped. "He wants to be a rhino."

UPLIFTING
The crated rhinos are unloaded from a transport plane at the bush airstrip in Mombo after their arrival in Botswana.

"This project will one day be documented as one of the most ambitious conservation efforts in decades. It's almost like a movie. There are good guys and bad guys. There is a sense of history and a frisson of danger. But what would life be without danger?"

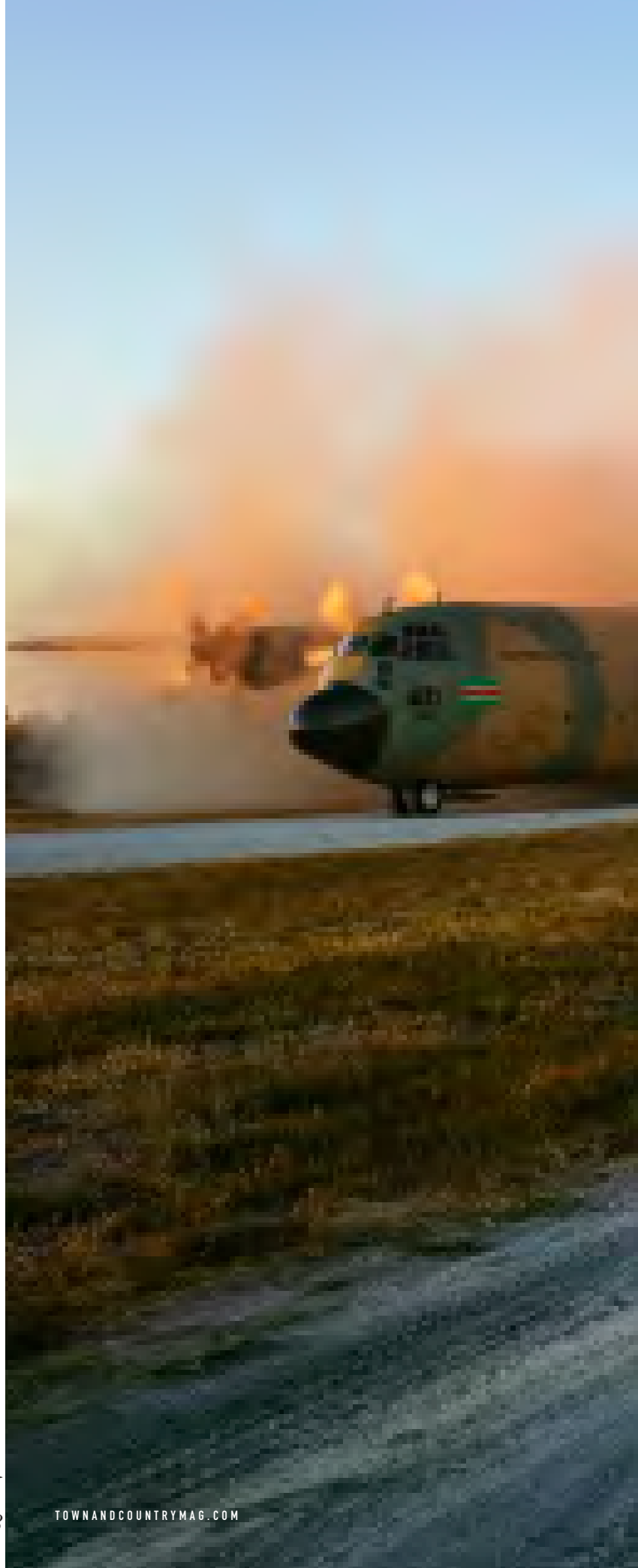
She is now holding the pulse oximeter—attached to the cow's earlobe—and reading the changing numbers out loud. Vickery listens intently as he works. A sudden drop in blood pressure is a danger to the prone giants, who, Vickery says, "have shockingly bad circulation in their feet." The men check the rhinos' vitals; the cow turns out to be 10 months pregnant, with six months of gestation to go ("a very large bun in the oven!" Thurman exclaims). They also collect DNA samples (which will be sent to a gene bank in Johannesburg), notch ears for easier visual identification in the bush, and attach electronic monitoring devices—"the *CSI* stuff," Vickery calls it. Another few minutes and both rhinos will be roused with an antidote to M99, and we'll walk them, still blindfolded, pushing and prodding their flanks and rears, into the steel containers in which they'll ride, lightly tranquilized, the 185 miles to the guarded quarantine boma in the South African town of Bela-Bela. Who knew such a job existed?

But for a few minutes we have them to ourselves. Thurman is crouching next to the cow's massive head and the dorsal hump of muscles that help support it, almost snuggling against her. The ever vigilant Vickery, beside her, maintains a firm grip on the deadly, scimitar-like lower horn. "You have to be aware all the time that the rhino can move, reawaken, hurt you. Humans are soft pink things," says Ives. But Thurman is relaxing into it, running her fingers over the animal's mouth. "Such a soft, gentle herbivore's mouth," she will reminisce that night over dinner. "Here was this 1.8-ton brute with the body of a warrior and yet the mouth of an angel." (Rhinos, toothless in the front, pluck grasses, leaves, and twigs with their lips.) "I was so moved," she continues. "I was just breathing in the moment. The dearness of her…"

She pauses. "I feel like I sound ridiculous."

But she doesn't. These are primordial sympathies. Nothing quite compares to the sheer emotional power of being so close to a wild creature of that size and unimaginable ancientness (rhinos have been around some 14 million years). When Vickery gave us a safety talk at the start of the trip—"I will take care of you, but please *listen*"—he also prepared us for the feelings. "It's a spiritual, surreal experience, to have subdued, without stress, such a prehistoric animal," he said. "To hear its deep breaths, to smell it, to touch its skin—even a rhino has soft bits. To see how delicate they really are, how vulnerable. There is the obvious excitement of it all, but also a quietness in the midst of all the panic."

My hands too were on the rhino's hide—deeply textured protective dermal armor vaguely reminiscent of the bark of a tree



HIGH SECURITY Botswana Defence Force pilots bring rhinos from South Africa to Mombo aboard a Hercules C-130 military transport plane. "I have lent myself to this," Thurman says. "I'm here to help."

POLO RALPH LAUREN PANTS ($145); **PURDEY** BOOTS (WORN THROUGHTOUT, $1,164).

"All the stress, all the hugely complex logistics… But when you see them wandering off into the sunset, those prehistoric miracles of nature… It's an absolute privilege to be involved in this."

SHE'S GOT GAME
Thurman with Fitt in the Mombo bomas, outfitting a white rhino with a monitoring device. "Benign, noble creatures," she calls them, and their poaching "so shameful."

but rubbery, layers of collagen arranged in a lattice structure an inch thick, yet also full of blood vessels. Piteous red rivulets trickled here and there from cuts where thorns had scratched her as she ran below the chopper. I felt we were all actors in an allegory: the prone giant, the small band of humans around her, all of us surrounded by the African bush, where our ancestors first roamed. How often must such a scene have been enacted here?

Later, Thurman would talk about the clothes she wore for the chase, now stained with rhino blood. "I would like to keep them. For sentimental reasons."

The dramatist William Saroyan wrote, "Man is an actor. He acts all manner of men, and each one is a lie. Only the animal in him is real." And sometimes the animal needs to get loaded. Our after-dinner sessions around the fire each night are long, raucous, existential, ribald, and, yes, alcohol-fueled. Oddly, we seem to be able to stay up until 2 a.m. and rise at dawn, feeling fresh, for the drama's next installment. "It's the post-adrenaline rush," says Ives, who rarely drinks.

On our fourth night the two South African rhinos are in a quarantine station after traveling under a hastily arranged security escort equipped with automatic weapons. Vickery and Collins have gotten word from South Africa's criminal intelligence department of a possible planned hijacking of the rhino truck ("more valuable," as Vickery points out, "than a Brink's truck full of gold"). We, however, settle in at Wilderness Safaris' Mombo Camp, in Botswana. Mombo is luxury au naturel: canvas tented suites on raised wooden walkways, indoor and outdoor showers, 100 percent solar-powered (Wilderness Safaris walks the sustainability talk), with private and public bars, generously stocked. As we sit around the fire, a nightly ritual, Vincent is getting heated about rhino horns, which are made of ordinary keratin, the same protein that's in our hair and nails. "There is no chemical compound in rhino horn that does anything! Let them eat their own fingernails!" he exclaims, referring to the grotesquely surging Asian demand.

Thurman wants to know if poachers take the smaller upper horn, as well as the lower one, which has so much more priapic symbolism. Yes, says Ives. "The small horns still weigh about two pounds—that's around $70,000 on the black market. But size is an interesting question." He walked into that one. "Size is always an interesting question," Thurman responds, adding, "lock me away when I get naughty."

I ask, "Are rhinos intelligent?" "No," Ives says, "but that's an arrogant question. They're survivors. They communicate. It's an infrasound language probably related to what elephants use, and we think it travels huge distances. But it has barely been studied yet. If rhinos go extinct, we may be losing something we don't even understand."

As the night (and drinking) progresses, the advocacy becomes increasingly passionate. Ives has been a tracker for 40 years; he calls himself a "planetist," and he's a persuasive fan of the rhino. "It's a flagship species—big and exciting and fantastic. And its plight represents so much else—the fragility of life on this planet, the onslaught of man. If we can't save the rhino, what else can't we save? But if we *can* save it, what an inspiration that will be. This project is about so much more than the rhino." Collins takes it up a notch. "We are fighting not just for the rhino but for the survival of the *human* species. We are absolutely dependent, as a species, on a pristine environment. You are kidding yourself if you think that we are not."

I think that we would all, in complete sobriety and seriousness, raise a glass to that.

At 1 a.m. we spot two shadows passing slowly just beyond the ring of the fire's light. Two lions. "As the sun sets," says Vincent, who started his career as a wilderness guide, "all the rules change. At night, to lions and hyenas, you are meat." I take another sip of my scotch and soda—what else is there to do?—and think about something else Ives said: "This translocation project will one day be documented as one of the most ambitious conservation efforts in decades. It's almost like a movie script. There are good guys and bad guys. There is a sense of history and a frisson of danger—things could go wrong. But what would life be without danger? There should always be a frisson." I'm feeling it now. And that, too, is a gift to humans from the wilderness.

It's the final scene of Act II. Back in South Africa, two white rhinos, a cow and calf (not the ones we captured but a pair that have already completed their 30-day quarantine in Bela-Bela), have been loaded onto a transport plane [CONTINUED ON PAGE 201]

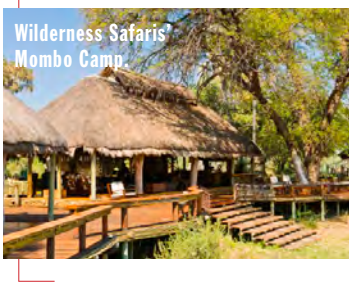
WHAT YOU CAN DO

On our last day in Mombo, two guests at the camp who had viewed the landing of the C-130 and the unloading and release of the rhinos into the wild handed Wilderness Safaris CEO Keith Vincent a check for $50,000, to go, via the Wilderness Wildlife Trust, to Rhino Conservation Botswana (which Map Ives directs).

"I am immediately purchasing another rhino and bringing it here," said Vincent. "Without our guests, we would not have the funds to do all that we've done." Not all of us, of course, can be that generous. But if you can, such a donation will enable you to participate in a trip much like the one described here, with rhino capture and monitoring and, if possible, a release. For details, go to TOWNANDCOUNTRYMAG.COM/LEISURE/RHINO-RESCUE-TRIP, or see the Fall/Winter issue of *T&C Travel*.

But even if you cannot contribute at that level, it is important to realize how crucial all tourism in Africa is to the survival of wildlife and the wilderness. If travelers don't come to safari lodges, human population pressure is such that over time the land on which animals now roam will be repurposed—for cattle, agriculture, or development. African communities will lose the jobs tourism generates (Mombo Camp employs 2.5 people for every bed), and the only places you'll be able to see a rhino or hear a lion roar will be in a zoo.

But the first priority is to stop the poaching—of the rhino most emphatically, but also of the elephant, the lion, and countless other species. And that, as Vincent points out, "can't be left to one company. It can't be left to a few individuals. It needs world attention." *K.G.*


Wilderness Safaris' Mombo Camp

MAP: HAISAM HUSSEIN. AGE FOTOSTOCK/ALAMY (MOMBO CAMP)

SAFE HAVEN
"What a paradise you've created here," Thurman said to Wilderness Safaris CEO Keith Vincent, with her at the Mombo bomas.

ETOILE ISABEL MARANT SHIRT (SIMILAR STYLES AVAILABLE); **ROLEX** WATCH ($9,500).

LOOKING UP
"Botswana's experiment," Thurman says, "is very hopeful."

RALPH LAUREN COLLECTION LONG-SLEEVED SHIRT ($695). FOR DETAILS SEE PAGE 202.

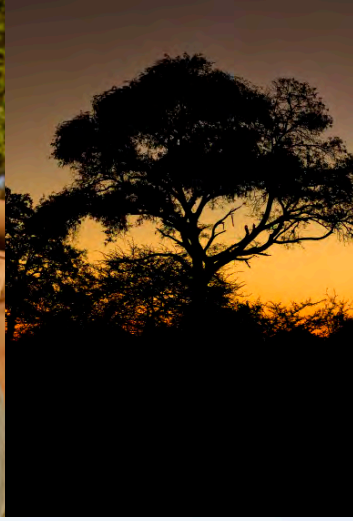
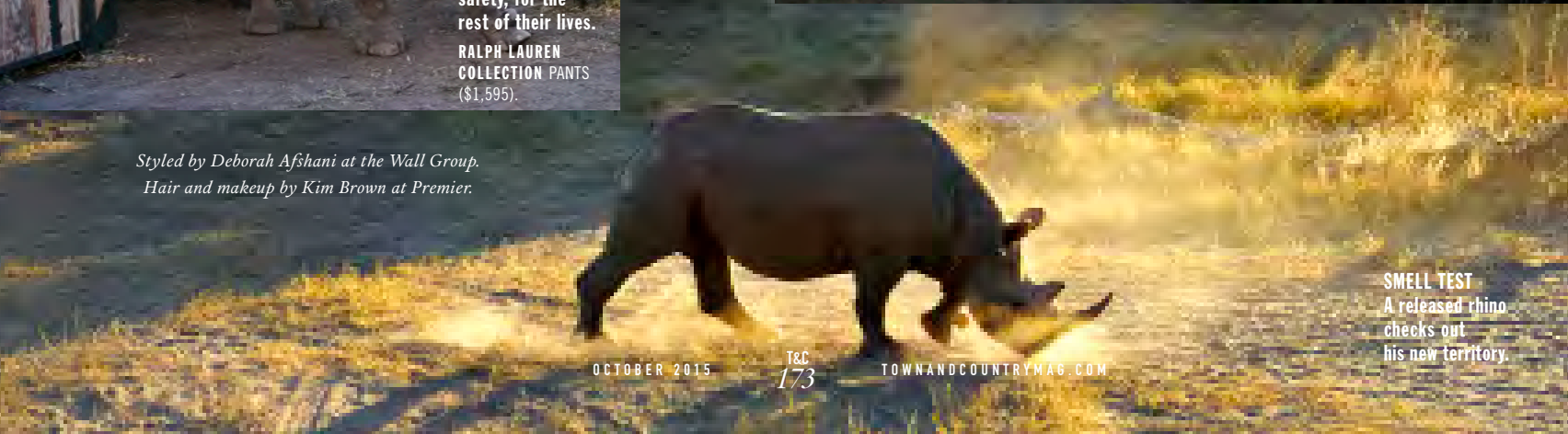


PHOTO FINISH
Thurman and Kai Collins, after the last rhino has been released. "That was amazing and totally addictive," she said.

GOOD TO GO
The black rhino cow and calf are released. They'll be monitored, for their safety, for the rest of their lives.

RALPH LAUREN COLLECTION PANTS ($1,595).

Styled by Deborah Afshani at the Wall Group. Hair and makeup by Kim Brown at Premier.



SMELL TEST
A released rhino checks out his new territory.

literary critic Hugh Kenner and economist John Kenneth Galbraith (with whom Buckley often went skiing in Switzerland), urged him to refrain from a lawsuit. An experienced publisher and polemicist, Buckley should have known better.

Vidal, characteristically, countersued, and three years of wrangling followed, resulting in a compromise in which *Esquire* settled, giving free advertising space to Buckley's *National Review* and paying his legal fees ($115,000). Buckley and Vidal each believed that he had won the skirmish, though the bad feelings continued until the ends of their lives. Shortly after Buckley's death Vidal commented, "He sued me and got nowhere. He sued *Esquire*, in which our words appeared. By then the coming right-wing surge was in view. And so *Esquire* cravenly agreed to settle with him for a few paragraphs worth of free advertising for his weird little magazine, the *National Review*, hardly the great victory he claimed."

The eight Buckley-Vidal debates were major television events, with as many as 10 million viewers for each session, and the saturation publicity turned both men into genuine celebrities. This was grand theater, of course. Both men were able and well-rehearsed performers, used to the TV camera. But they were also true believers, arguing across a growing cultural divide.

To Buckley, Vidal was a deviant, a pornographer, and, worst of all, a traitor to his class who had willfully sided with the enemy, which included the impolite young demonstrators on the streets of Chicago. Vidal, meanwhile, saw Buckley as nothing more than an apologist for greed, empire building, and Richard Nixon.

Those who watch the debates again (excerpts are readily available on YouTube) will marvel at the quickness and eloquence of both men. My own sense is that Buckley's defenses of Nixon's character and the righteousness of the Vietnam War have not worn well. Vidal had history on his side, the ultimate advantage.

We have since become used to loud, rambunctious arguments on television. The cable channels in particular overflow each night with shouting, posturing, cynicism, and tedious snark. To a degree the Buckley-Vidal debates can be seen as responsible for this change. Certainly, political commentary before 1968 was a more sober affair.

On the other hand, it seems unlikely that viewers of network (or cable) television will ever again be treated in prime time to debates as sustained and well-informed, even eloquent, as these. «

AFRICA'S ARK

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 172] and sent to Maun, Botswana. They are met at the airport by both President and T.K. Khama, who happen to be in Maun and think it worthwhile to witness the arrival of two new national treasures. (All imported rhinos, even if purchased by a private company like Wilderness, automatically become state property.) Then it's on to Mombo, where we await them.

The aircraft that lands at Mombo's bush airstrip is a Hercules C-130, Lockheed's massive Vietnam-era transport plane, piloted by BDF airmen and painted in camouflage colors. "What other government in the world," Vickery says, "would give us planes in which to transport wild animals?"

As the clouds of sand and dust kicked up by the wheels billow toward her, Thurman, who has been standing a little too close to the runway, steps back. "I realized that the death of the mother would not be an evolutionary advantage to my family," says the actress, who has three children. That's how we talk after six days in the African bush: evolution, life, death, mating, breeding.

BDF soldiers mill around the runway, helping, watching, photographing as the steel containers are unloaded from the plane and transferred to a nearby boma. To a military operations newbie like me, the entire scene on the airstrip, unfolding in the African twilight, is heart-stopping.

"The manpower you are putting behind this is extraordinary," Thurman says to T.K. Khama over lunch in Mombo a few days later. He has arrived, on his birthday no less, at Vincent's invitation. "How moving it was to actually see the joy of military men performing a labor of love," she says. "It's something I have never seen. It is, sadly, not what they are asked to do most of the time elsewhere in the world."

Ives puts a blunter spin on it: "The military presence tells poachers that if they come here, we will blow their balls off." He's talking Khama's language. Botswana has lost only six rhinos in 15 years—and all have been "opportunistic" killings rather than the work of organized crime syndicates. But the poachers are coming. "It's not a matter of if but when," says the minister. "A few weeks ago we killed three poachers from Namibia on the Namibia-Botswana border. We do get criticized occasionally for our poaching stance"—armed men will be shot if they do not surrender their arms immediately on request—"but that message travels very well. It's clear: We are not open to that sort of business. I have a saying that keeps me motivated: God will judge the poacher. It is up to us to arrange the meeting."

It's time for Act III of the translocation. Five rhinos—a white cow and calf, a black cow and calf, and a young black bull—are about to be released from the bomas near Mombo back into the wild. (They arrived in the preceding weeks and had been getting acclimated to their future home, the Moremi Game Reserve.) Vincent explains to me why it's safe for us to be watching from atop a mere termite mound 50 feet away. "The rhino's tail is connected to its spinal cord, which is connected to its brain. We can tell by the tail when the rhino is going to move." I'm remembering something else Vincent had told me: "Rhinos run faster than Usain Bolt. You think you have a little bit of time, but actually you don't."

Thurman and Collins are perched up high on the boma walls, right above the gate, which they're about to swing open. Everyone else is in game drive vehicles. "No noise, no sudden movements," Vickery says.

I'm trying to not be "the girl"—I can do this, I can stand here. The black rhino bull won't take off; he keeps circling. He's coming toward us—I'm fighting the flight impulse—mock charging one of the vehicles, then reapproaching the boma walls, behind which stand the black female and calf. We can hear their pant calls. "He was talking to them about his predicament," Thurman said later, "about him being on the outside already, while they were still inside."

It takes him almost an hour to depart. "This is extraordinary. In all the releases we do, we rarely see this," exclaims Andre Uys, a veterinarian and Vickery's business partner. The black female and calf are released next. It's quick. They follow the bull's exact path into the bush. We feel there's a family reunion in the offing somewhere out there. Indeed, during a monitoring drive the next morning, we come upon the threesome, huddled together, miles away in the bush.

Then the white female and calf are released. A quick look in our direction and they're off, jauntily curled tails twitching. Michael Fitt, the sustainability coordinator

for Wilderness Safaris and head of the boma crew, has spent the last two weeks scattering the rhinos' dung in ever widening circles around the boma, to make them feel at home. "I belong here!" Thurman is channeling a rhino. "My shit's here!"

"That was amazing. And totally addictive," she says when it's all over.

Collins sums it up. "All the stress, all the hugely complex logistics… But when you see them wandering off into the sunset, those prehistoric miracles of nature… It's an absolute privilege to be involved in this."

A few days later (and in what feels like a parallel universe) Thurman and I are sitting over lunch at New York's Carlyle Hotel. "I keep circling back to this idea of being willing to make an effort," she says, reflecting on the experience. "I think so many of us feel that there is no point—Who are we? What can we do? There are so many dire situations, and it's all out of our control. And there is a sort of truth to that. But what I learned in Africa is that one must make an effort anyway. Because you just don't know. Until the story is concluded, there is always hope."

Thurman is moved by the commitment of everyone she encountered on the rescue. "Nobody we met was doing it for fame and fortune," she points out. "It's as if they were called by nature to a service that is irresistible. Particularly Map Ives—he's an idealist who will not be discouraged, who is willing to rage. I find that so exciting. I would like to go back."

As this article nears its press date I get a dispatch from the front lines. "On Thursday night," Collins writes, "there was a very strong wind, and poachers used the opportunity to shoot two of the white rhinos in the Bela-Bela bomas in South Africa. They clearly hoped that the animals would drop close to the fence so they could cut off the horns quickly. They didn't, and ran instead in the opposite direction, toward the security detail. No one heard the shots—so they say. The poachers left without the horns. Both animals died today [August 2] despite attempts to save them. One cow left an orphaned calf, although it is old enough to survive on its own. It will be moved to Botswana in two or three weeks."

As Ives said, "Rhino conservation is a deadly serious business, and Botswana will need international support for this battle. The responsibility wakes me up at night, but what we're doing also soothes the pain. We have to face up to the fragility of life." One of the many lessons of the wilderness. «

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