

Scatterlings of Africa

Botswana 1996

By Lawrence Winkler

'We are going on a safari
See the lions from my Ferrari
Hope we do not get the malari
It's safari time...'

Dr Bombay, *Safari*

Robyn kissed me goodbye at the ferry terminal. The trip across the Georgia Strait was remarkable for two reasons: (1) Our boat's apparent inability in coupling with the dock on the other side, and (2) A conversation with a Swiss transplant living in Victoria who went apoplectic when I mentioned the name of the current collectivist tyrant of the province.

"If the Swiss were running BC..." He wagged an index finger.

"If the Swiss were running BC..." I said. "The hospitals would have pay toilets."

I was on the first leg of a journey to Johannesburg but that wasn't my ultimate destination. I was meeting my New Zealand father-in-law, Ronnie, for a bucket list pilgrimage to Botswana. I had collected its stamps as a boy when it was still the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Thirty years after its independence, Robyn had booked us on the flagship camping expedition of Drifters Adventure Tours. *Walk your Dreams...* We were going on safari, six years before it became an Apple web browser, in an era when a tranny was still a transmission, LBT was lettuce, bacon and tomato, and before 'woke' would mutate from a verb to an adjective. After years of sedentary shriveling, my wanderlust screamed for a resurrection. *Why am I soft in the middle?.. The rest of my life is so hard... I need a photo-opportunity... I want a shot at redemption...*

I took the Maverick Bus to the Hotel Vancouver, and then an Aeroporter to every hotel in town until I had to ask the driver if he knew the way. I checked into my flight to Frankfurt and headed towards my departure gate. Along the corridor I stumbled across a seafood shop where little Oriental people made vast amounts of money selling tiny bits of the local denizens of the deep to other little Oriental people with closed minds and open wallets. When one of the little Oriental people inquired if I needed help, I told him I wasn't in need.

"Too expensive?" He chortled with the similar sales technique that had built the Bridge on the River Kwai.

"Nope." I said. "Too small."

Only cheap airfares take you over the North Pole to get to Africa. The Lufthansa flight was nine hours. The food was the usual stratospheric Styrofoam with a few sausages and apples and hazelnuts thrown into some simulated gemütlichkeit. I sat beside an ancient Vancouver stockbroker named Orville. I nudged him awake when he began drooling on my right shoulder. He awoke on point.

“You want an investment tip?” He asked. I told him I didn’t want an investment tip.

“When you get to Johannesburg, call your wife and tell her to buy a Bolivian stock called Tapajos Gold.”

“Why?” I asked.

“It’s going to explode like a rocket.” It didn’t sound like a safe investment.

“What stock exchange?” I asked.

“Vancouver.” It sounded even less like a safe investment.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Eighty-three.” He said.

“If you’re such a hotshot broker, why are you still working?” The rest of the flight was quiet. In Frankfurt, bagged like the game I planned on shooting, I fell in love with a new Leica camera in a duty-free shop, and we ran off to Africa together.

The animated clicking sounds of smiling Xhosa teenagers greeted my arrival at the crowded South African Airways embarkation gate. After six long hours as a departure lounge lizard, the SAA boarding announcement was worth the wait. Unlike the class divisions still plaguing our rainbow nation final stop, there was no prolonged stratified trickle of elite gold and platinum and cattle class passengers by row number.

“OK, everybody.” Rolled the ticket agent. “Huistoegaantyd. Time to go home.” And with that, five hundred multicolored Africans stood up and single-filed onto the jumbo jet. *Cry, the Beloved Country*. I sat beside a plum farmer from Namibia. We toasted each other in halting German with a Bordeaux blend that tasted like black cherries.

All roads lead to Johannesburg. Alan Paton rang in my ears as they recompressed on landing. *Nosecond, Johannesburg is needed upon the earth. One is enough.*

A stocky middle-aged Afrikaner named Ivan was waiting for me outside security. As he drove us to the Drifters Inn in Northcliff, he filled me in on what had happened to South Africa since I had worked there 14 years earlier. We spoke of our hopes for Mandela.

“I fear for the country when the old man dies.” He said.

Ronnie greeted me with his trademark bonhomie from our balcony when we arrived at the Inn. *If you’ll be my bodyguard...I can be your long lost pal...*

I tried to sleep but couldn’t. Something was nagging in the back of my brain. I called Robyn.

“Buy Tapajos Gold.” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Bolivian gold mining stock on the Vancouver Stock Exchange.” I was calling from E’Goli. The City of Gold, with the deepest mines in the world, 4 kilometres deep.

“How much should I buy?” She asked.

“A lot.”

Ronnie and I caught up with each other next day in a jet lag fog over a pub lunch of burgers and Greek salad at Baron & Archer, a local watering hole that was to become our standard, and a steak dinner at a Portuguese restaurant that evening. Sleep remained elusive.

My old Cape Town memories flooded back in guava juice next morning over breakfast at a local mall. We had signed up for a guided tour of what was once known as the Southwestern Township.

The South African government created Soweto in the 1930s to geographically separate the races. Blacks were moved from Johannesburg to townships divided from White suburbs by a *cordon sanitaire*, usually a river, a railway track, an industrial area or a highway.

The apartheid intention was to construct a dormitory shanty town on steroids for non-whites who required passes to work in the white houses and factories and industries of Johannesburg. It quickly became the largest Black city in South Africa. To maintain tight military control, access was limited to four easily secured highways penetrating the four cardinal points of the compass. The government restricted infrastructure and services and prevented residents from owning their homes or starting their own businesses. Roads remained unpaved, and inhabitants shared one water tap and communal bucket toilet among far too many squalid houses.

In 1971, Parliament passed the Black Affairs Administration Act and appointed the West Rand Board to take over the powers and obligations of Soweto. Manie Mulder, its politically appointed board chairman had no experience in native affairs. He gave a most famous quote to the Rand Daily Mail in May 1976. *The broad masses of Soweto are perfectly content, perfectly happy. Black-White relationships at present are as healthy as can be. There is no danger whatever of a blow-up in Soweto.*

But on 16 June 1976, mass protests erupted over the government's policy to enforce education in Afrikaans rather than their native language. Police opened fire on 10,000 marching students. The number killed in the Soweto uprising was given as 176 but estimates of up to 700 have been made. Doctors recorded bullet wounds as abscesses. *All the blood washed by rain... And all tears dried by age...*

An angry mob broke into the building and stoned Dr Melville Edelstein, a lifelong humanitarian, to death. His Litvak parents had first travelled to Cape Town in 1896 before joining the masses of Boere-Jode farmer Jews. A reporter later found his body impaled with a note. *Beware Afrikaans is the most dangerous drug for our future.* The evening news brought out all the publicity. Just a little atrocity deep in the city.

With such a horrendous history, foreign tourists, weighed down with their fancy cameras, wandering the squatter camps and giving money to the street urchins, expected something edgy. Everything above the mud was made of tin and tatters. Even outside the old 'matchbox' houses, the smell was overpowering. Inside, the conditions were horrid. *A man walks down the street... It's a street in a strange world... Maybe it's the third world..*

In the year of our visit, Sowetans earned six and a half times less than their counterparts in the better areas of Joburg. In the ultimate shock tour, Ronnie went into shock. *Maybe it's his first time around... Doesn't speak the language... He is a foreign man...*

I found him donating his pack of cigarettes to a thin, old Zulu and asked him why.

"He told me he had tobacco losses." Ronnie said. I looked at the man.

"He told you he had tuberculosis."

"Oh." He said and broke down weeping.

The random advertising billboards were poignantly ironic. *Tastic Rice-o-mix flavoured rice... Take a break from all white cooking... tasty and perfect every time...* Under an old beach umbrella, the young black mother who sold eggs from her roadside card table was flanked by a small cement water tower plastered with posters. Some were from the township. *Soweto Beauty, Health, Fitness, and Hair Show 1994*. Some were ridiculous. *When eating brings discomfort, ENO brings relief*. And some, like the large *Striptease* playbill plastered with a naked cross-legged image of Demi Moore were unspeakably offensive.

The tour took us into history. In one poor part of Africa, Vilakazi Street was the only path in the world to have the historical residences of two Nobel Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, on the same road. We visited the memorial to Hector Pieterse, a 12-year-old boy killed by police in the 1976 uprising, whose iconic photo began the end of Apartheid. Ronnie and I drank Gogo's Ginger beer, named after a legendary *shebeen* queen in Sophia Town during the prohibition era of the 1950's, as we toured the Soweto Country Club and Home for the Aged. But the most ironic attraction was the BMW junkyard. It never occurred to us that the luxury German vehicles would have become the mafia's 'bicycle of Soweto' but, not unlike those of Cockney and Australian rhyming slang, they had several affectionate names for their favorite mode of transport. *Beat My Wife... Break My Window... Bob Marley and the Wailers...*

Back at Baron & Archer that evening, we ate prawn curry with a bottle of white wine.

"Fancy another?" Ronnie asked, as he poured out the last of it. The conundrum was less about extravagance than it was about the limits to survivability. Ronnie was a beer man, had been his whole life. He well knew the effects of one more beer but he had no concept of what an additional bottle of wine could contribute to an expanding universe of remorse.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Ronnie." I said.

"You're on holiday." He said, ordering up a new bottle. It turned out that I was on holiday, mostly from my usual good judgement.

And so, we hurt the next morning. On our last day in Joburg, Ronnie and I walked to Rosebank Mall where we met Ernesto, an Argentinian businessman who offered to drive us to Goodfellows where I bought some wine for the final trip home. It was strange but we were more aware of personal danger in the wealthy white part of the City of Gold than we had been a day earlier in the supercity slum. Every home in Johannesburg seemed to come with razor wire, automatic gates, dogs, and instantaneous weaponized reaction to any criminal threat. *Warning... 24 Hour Protection... Armed response to radio signal alarm... 787-1115*.

Five years before our visit, the Group Areas Act was scrapped, allowing thousands of poor blacks to move into Jozi from the townships and other war-torn African nations. All hell broke loose. We came upon a wealthy white woman at the wheel of her Mercedes told an elderly black man to 'pass quickly' so she could open the gate to her estate driveway. *Ag, Shem*.

Even Charlie the Alsatian and McIvor the Scottish German terrier, the armed response system of the Drifters Inn, had learned the difference between black and white. It didn't matter that they barked most of the night. For early the following morning, Ronnie and I were going on safari.

Fifteen years before African explorer Richard Burton appropriated the Swahili/Arabic word for 'travel' at the end of the 1850's, another English engineer named William Cornwallis Harris led an

expedition to observe and record wildlife and landscapes which formalized the safari style of journey—it started with a not too strenuous rising at first light, an energetic day walking, an afternoon rest then concluding with a formal dinner and telling stories in the evening over drinks and tobacco. Whatever ritual structure Harris had imposed on these expeditions, in whatever Kenyan colonial styles of pocketed and epauleted and belted crisp drill cotton khaki bush jackets and leisure suits, pith helmets and slouch hats, animal skin patterns and Holland & Holland or Westley Richards rifles would become safari *de rigueur*, had little to do with how raw Ronnie and I would be seeing the wilds of Southern Africa.

Safari fashion also extends to fragrance collections by American designer Ralph Lauren; The Safari fragrance created in 1990 was advertised as "a floral aroma with a light breeze scented by grasses, freedom, and the romance of vast open spaces."

Morning broke on the City of Gold like the dawn of time. Just below our insomnia, the sliding gate groaned to get out of the way of the 2-ton juggernaut roaring through the gap it had left in the wall. Whatever parked under the courtyard Canary palms was big and noisy and as rough as the country that had spawned it. Out of the driver's seat of an old Samel-20 troop carrier, riding high on mammoth wheels to protect it from land mines, welded together in right angles and painted white to hide its provenance, jumped a fit young khaki-clad South African. A Tyrolean hat sat on his blonde brush cut; Serengeti sunglasses hid his white eyebrows.

Garth would be our guide and guardian and chauffeur and chef and, for the hero he was, would have us in his debt forever. We climbed over introductions and up into the open viewing box, and Garth ground up and down through the gears, picking up and checking off the list of fellow adventurers who joined us on the way north out of Jo'berg. By the city's outskirts we had a full truck: Andy, a Kiwi doctor and his girlfriend, Koo, Tony, a transplanted Brit printer immigrant to New Zealand, and his girlfriend Willie, Paul and Steve and Pres (three young guys from Holland), a quiet, pony-tailed Swiss guy named Lukas, and two German girls, Anna and Wiebke.

Our first day on the road was committed to just get up the road—a 1200-kilometre slog from the high veldt to the salt pans of eastern Botswana. Four hours into our own Voortrek (including a ninety-minute detour around Pretoria), we made a pit stop for petrol and Wimpy burgers in Potgeitersrus, seven years before they changed the name to Mokapane. It was here I realized that Ronnie and I were heading into the remote acacia bushveldt without the benefit of alcohol, the cause of, and answer to, all of life's problems.

A nearby bottle shop provided the opportunity to acquire a perfect libation that might last the entire safari. Unfortunately, I didn't pick one of these. Not for me the robustness of high proof liquor. Instead, I grabbed a box of bottled poetry, sunlight held together by water—a 5-litre cask of Namaqua Cellar Cask Johannesburg Red—*With a gentle breeze from the nearby ocean to cool them down, a selection of cultivars perfect for creating affordable quality produce an everyday drinking red wine with a distinctive bouquet, a healthy ruby colour with a smoky strawberry nose, sweet with a firm touch of Merlot, Pinotage and Ruby Cabinet, and a long fruity aftertaste, best served chilled.* Alas, there was no gentle breeze from the nearby ocean and the only thing served chilled

about my purchase was its promise which, after several days in the African sun, would be left unchilled and unfulfilled, having turned into bad sherry and the butt of our merry band.

Refueled and reprovisioned, Garth navigated our Landmaster out through a gauntlet of roadside vendors selling potatoes, onions, and aluminum cookware into a seven-hour purgatory of heat and linear motion that brought us into Botswana and Nata Sanctuary well after dark. His flashlight danced around our campsite to show us how to put up our old army surplus tents for the first time. Huddled together around a campfire, we ate spaghetti Bolognese while Garth warned us about straying from the herd. He recounted the story of one East German tourist who ‘went for a walk’ one daybreak and was killed by the Cape Buffalo in the last photo on his camera. Ronnie and I slept in the middle of our canvas tent.

I never knew of a morning in Africa when I woke that I was not happy. After a breakfast of rusks, muesli, fruit and coffee, the three Dutch guys, and Lukas and Ronnie and I wandered across the pan in search of game but only found tracks and spoor. At midday, we folded our tents and reboarded the Unimog for a hot, windy trip down the Maun Road.

Ronnie stood on the engine box behind the cab, scanning the horizon. He pointed with an index finger what his keen eye had seen running through the scrub.

“There you are.” He said. “Your first lion.”

“That’s a warthog, Ronnie.” I said. But it was too late. From that moment, the merry band pointed out every warthog we passed as a lion. The next time Robyn and I flew to New Zealand, I brought a stuffed toy warthog as a present.

“Lion.” I smiled, handing it over.

The peripheral patchy shrubby savannah and marshes at the fringes of the salt desert held great oases of Baobabs, each tree more than 4000 years old. Wildlife was supposed to be scarce during the dry season, but there was enough. Lone zebras wandered termite mounds. We drove past marabou storks and the remains of a dead kudu with its hindquarters eaten and long gone.

Garth steered our great white hope through the Kalahari Basin along the edges of the Makgadikgadi Salt Pans, a lunar landscape of superlatives. The evaporated lake that spawned its formation tens of thousands of years ago is the size of Switzerland. In 2019, mitochondrial DNA research identified it as the 200,000- year-old birthplace of all modern humans. *Echoes of the very first cry... Who made me here and why beneath the copper sun?*

Driven by local climate change after 70,000 years of settlement, our ancestors migrated northeast and southwest through fertile green corridors. After the rain disappeared, a thin layer of blue-green algae was the only plant life that could exist in a boundless desert of salt. The missionaries couldn’t get across it. We were just a few Scatterlings hurtling along its rim. But now, they have lithium.

Four hours into our journey, we turned south off the Maun Road. in the last rays of the late afternoon, Garth eased the Unimog into a palm island at Jack’s Camp on the sharp edge of the Makgadikgadi Pan.

We spread our tents beneath a grove of mokolwane trees. The wildlife was more abundant. A vervet monkey sprang out a metal trash bin. There were signs of more. *Please do close the door after using the toilet in order to rid baboons getting inside and messing everything up.*

Garth made a stew of Herculean proportions and we all sat in a circle and chatted the evening away. Later, in the middle of the night, full on illuminated under an African halfmoon and bottom lit clouds, I walked out into the salt pan accompanied only by our trenching spade, Douglas, and dug a hole in the dry, salty, clay crust. The only sound in the universe was its crunch underfoot, like the other salt deserts I had known in Bolivia and India and China. *And we are homeless, homeless... Moonlight sleeping on a midnight lake...*

Back on the Maun Road next morning, Garth joggled his Unimog stick shift up and down through 5 synchromesh gears, the virtual villages of Xhane and Joani and Chanoga, and 250 kilometres to Crocodile Camp on the banks of the Boteti River. After pitching our tents, he drove us back into Maun to change money and reprovision for the next day's trip into the Okavango Delta. Back in the day, it was a town of wild donkeys and red lechwe and tribal rondavels and cattle and goats, all wrapped in dry heat and soft indolence, although there were signs in Setswana of harder things to come: Go thibela AIDS go motlhofo... Go nna fela o sa tlhakanekwe dikoso... Go nna le motho a le mongwe... Go dirisa sekausu. *Preventing AIDS is easy... Do not mix the courses... Be with one person... Use a sock.*

Back at the campsite, after a swim at the pool, I dozed under an acacia tree. Just on dusk, we all congregated around one campfire while Garth stoked another for a braai of steak and boerewors and sosaties.

"Dit is die lewe, neh Boet?" Channeling my poor Afrikaans between bites of overdone meat and sips of Johannesburg Red. *This is the life.*

"Braaivleis, rugby, sunny skies, and Chevrolet." He agreed. And told us more Okavango horror stories as southern stars filled the sky.

Maybe it was because of my afternoon nap that I couldn't sleep. Maybe it was because of Garth's cautionary tales. Maybe it was the barking dogs that gave way to the crowing roosters. I looked over at my father-in-law, sleeping soundly in his swag. In his life of the time, he was having the time of his life. *He is surrounded by the sound... Cattle in the marketplace... Scatterlings and orphanages... He sees angels... Spinning in infinity... He says, 'Amen and Hallelujah.'*

I awoke to a hornbill pecking at an orange impaled on our papyrus reed fence. After a big baked bean breakfast, we packed up slowly until midmorning when Garth returned from town with fresh provisions.

"All aboard." He ordered. And the Unimog lurched out of Crocodile Camp into a torrid dry season swelter, along the fence that divided agriculture from adventure.

The great Okavango River, rather than streaming to the sea, flows southeast inland from central Angola into the vast Kalahari, and disappears. In its annual ebb and flow, we were rolling into its ephemeral ebb, to where it no longer was. Before the evaporation, its currents had molded and sculpted the land beneath, then lifting like a theatre curtain to reveal a landscape without landmarks. Lost in a dry delta abyss, our tire tracks would map it no more than those of the year before, now buried under shifting sands.

But there is still water in the delta in the dry season. We arrived at a narrow alluvial fan finger channel dotted with day lilies and lined with papyrus reeds, swaying in the current and reflected golden on the water in the morning light.

A dozen Wayeyi men waited under the mokolwane palms, sitting on their haunches beside their diagonally parked mokoros, 20-foot-long sausage tree dugout canoes that, from a distance, looked like brown pea pods in the sun. With smiling faces of less colour and more khmer, it could have been Cambodia. Garth jumped down from the Unimog cab and greeted them with three-ways handshakes.

“Dumelang!” Rang through the encampment. *Hello!*

Pairs of boatmen welcomed pairs of our merry band into their hollowed-out hardwood conveyances. I sat behind Ronnie, the sacred cask of Johannesburg Red cradled between my knees. One of the native men sat in the bow; the other stood in the stern behind us, pushing us forward into the shallow waterway with his long *ngashe* pole. It could have been a Venetian gondola or an Oxford punt if the polers had worn different hats. Everyone was in a festive mood but more than crocodiles lurked in the lily pads.

Garth had warned us that, because mokoros were used by poachers, they were vulnerable to attack by hippos, which had figured out the game. My breakfast borborygni flapped like hostile hippopotami on the hardwood bottom of the boat. *Braaaahhhck!*

“Hippo!” I shouted, and everyone broke into fits of slapstick laughter. And then I did it again with the same fart fiesta feedback.

“Sis Wink!” Garth called back. “Did you just baff?”

Ronnie looked around in puzzlement.

“Where’s the jungle?”

“What?”

“Where’s the jungle?” He repeated. “Isn’t this supposed to be Africa?” It was then I realized that my father-in-law, first time out of New Zealand and raised on Johnny Weismuller films, had been expecting a more tropical equatorial experience.

“We’re a long way from the Congo basin, Ronnie.” I said. “It’s a big continent, and Tarzan doesn’t live in the Okavango swamp.”

“Oh.” Dropped the penny.

It may not have been rainforest but the place was still very much alive. Diving Bee Eaters preyed on unsuspecting insects. Snakebirds torpedoed through the water spearing fish. The elongated Nosferatu feet of colourful Jacanas treaded delicately on the floating vegetation, and African fish eagles cried overhead. With every push of his *ngashe*, our poler propelled us onward through the narrow reed-lined channel past a mosaic of marshy islands established in ancient termite mounds where trees had taken root. After twenty minutes, we glided into a swimming hole and plunged headlong into the water. Half-submerged in the coolness, we played frisbee and ate a fruit salad lunch, until Garth motioned for us to reboard our dugouts. The day floated further fluvial past elephants and baboons into the late afternoon. As the sun’s rays lengthened the heat dissipated, the delta dust danced in the breeze, and the mokoros transformed back into brown pea pods in the twilight.

As we wrestled our canvas tents into shape, Garth pulled apart several chickens into an excellent stew. A waxing gibbous moon rose over this uncharted world. Flickering among the reeds,

fireflies confused the stars. Frogs chanted endless mantras in the darkness. The map was broken but we were whole.

The eastern streaks of first light kindled fire in the sky; soft breezes whispered through the reeds. Our mokoros slid from the mud bank into the African dawn. We moved silent past our first glimpse of hippos, or at least that's what our Wayeyi boatmen thought.

Braaaahhhck! The dugout bottom beneath my bottom rattled and reverberated with flatulent furore, exciting panic and then howls of laughter through our aquatic amphitheatre.

"Wink!" Garth shouted.

"Every time he farts it pushes us forward." Ronnie said.

Most members of our merry band were good-natured and congenial. Except for Tony, who had earned the nickname 'Gabby' because of his incessant imperious blathering about everything for which he considered himself an expert. Which was everything he considered. My gassiness was benign by comparison. He was also a racist and a chauvinist, traits which would become increasingly apparent as our safari continued.

After another midday swim and a feast of tuna and gherkins and tomato and cheese and asparagus, our Wayeyi gondoliers poled their mokoros deeper into the Okavango channels. We arrived at James's Camp on dusk. Ronnie and I had become proficient in erecting and tearing down our canvas condo. After an evening game walk, Garth served another braai around our campfire. The African sun had added new flavours to our cask of Johannesburg Red—a horrid box of acidic plonk had acquired off-key notes of chamomile and almonds and yak butter and molasses. But without it, we would need to survive on nothing but food and water. A flaming tangerine sunset bled into the channel reflections and onto the reeds.

During the night there came thunder and lightning and then a soft and quiet female rain, just enough to keep us awake and wondering. In a country home to much of the Kalahari Desert, the word for rain in Setswana, Pula, is the same as its national state currency, the symbolism of its blue-grey flag, and its national motto. *Let there be rain.*

Garth served up bacon and scrambled eggs for breakfast next morning and then took our merry band on a five-four game walk in the delta. Our path crossed those of elephants, rooibok, giraffe, springbok, baboon, wildebeest, and a vulture atop a red lechwe carcass just abandoned by wild dogs. The termite mounds were massive, built vertically so their inhabitants could avoid drowning in the shallow water table. Back at the campsite, we spent our afternoon sitting around the fire. Just before sunset one of the boatmen took me on a private tour to experience hippo squeals and grunts close but not too close. My sound effects had been a poor rendition of the real thing. Garth put together an excellent crocodile stew. It gave me dreams of home. *And we are the scatterlings of Africa... on a journey to the stars... Far below, we leave forever... dreams of what we were.*

It was a long boat ride back to the Unimog next morning. I had to pole back a few hundred metres to retrieve the Tevas I forget at our last swimming hole. We left the boatmen, now reunited with their wives and children, in a trail of dust. The ride back to Maun was a long hot grind. Under my safari hat, standing behind the cab for airflow, I tied a red keffiyeh loose around my nose and mouth. The journey broke only for a bottle shop stop for a gigantic tin of Coke. Thatch and grass

rondavels gave way to mud houses closer to town. Back at Crocodile Camp, the afternoon floated away at the pool, reading, napping, and talking to another safari guide, a lost soul named Ernie. His wife left him and took the kids to Jo'berg. He still hoped for their return.

We spoke of Africa then and now. Ernie told me of his trials with tribes and tourists. On one excursion, he was so desperate to get the French and Dutch halves of his group together, he put marijuana in the stew. It had no diplomatic effect on the warring factions but, at the end of the safari, he received a glowing report from both sides.

“Thank goodness I have the job I do.” He said. “Otherwise, I’d have nothing.” He wasn’t far off otherwise. For all the risks they took driving and cooking and guarding and nature interpreting and problem solving, Drifter’s guides made less than \$500 a month. The night dogs howled restless until the Tswana roosters broke the dawn.

A megaphone message from a local politician running for re-election moved through the camp during breakfast. If voting could change anything, they would have made it illegal. Midmorning found us clambering back aboard the Unimog for a six-hour slog through the Mababwe depression. Here the worst clays in Botswana made for the deepest during the wet season. The natives were notorious for deliberately directing strangers to flooded Khwai River routes that would mire them stuck above their axles. A wildebeest skull atop a sign announced we had made it through. *Savuti 54... Kasane 226...*

Moremi Game Reserve was named in 1963 for Chief Moremi III of the resident Ngamiland BaTawana tribe. It was designated a reserve rather than a park because they allowed the BaSarwa Bushmen to stay. The midday heat that raised blisters in the atmosphere and the malarial mosquitos should have been a dealbreaker. Garth navigated through Moremi North Gate and six hours of us dodging mopane and acacia tree branches. Just beyond Xakanaxa, we arrived at our MK1 campsite to a drumbeat of snorting water hippo, breathing the same air. Stir fry stuck to merry ribs under the stars. Sleep came fast to tired children under the moon.

We broke camp and cracked a hundred kilometres of savannah by sunrise next morning. The wildlife on the way to Third Bridge camp—giraffe and zebra and jackal and impala and wildebeest and a leopard and several of Ronnie’s lions—had wilted in the blast furnace trying to bleach the marrow from their bones. It was insanely hot. After a lunch of pilchard and corned beef sandwiches I dragged my bruised and battered numbness under the Unimog for a siesta. A hundred elephant legs raised dust devils through the campsite in the late afternoon. After the herd passed, I crawled from my sandy slumber to everyone’s relief.

Another early start steered our Landmaster on a northeastern track into one of the hottest days of the safari. Through an endless landscape of parched scrub and elephant herds in their desperate search for water, after too many hours of troop carrier clattering, Garth pulled us into the Savuti #1 campsite. We pitched our canvas under the shade of some big acacia trees, next to a fire pit. The site was unfenced which allowed three warthogs access free rein to stand guard around the kitchen trailer. Garth pointed to a series of open wooden structures a few metres toward the dry channel bed.

“Ablution blocks.” He said. “Flush toilets and running water.” I didn’t need telling twice.

I ran downhill as fast as my legs could carry me through an open dunny door. Finally, I thought, a place where I could sit and relieve myself like a civilized man. I hadn't counted on finding a gigantic Power's toad in the toilet bowl. The creature comforts were already spoken for; my evacuation would take a different turn. I returned to the merry band to find Ronnie up an acacia tree with a tin can and a wire.

"I'll be down in a minute, mate." He said. "Just calling home."

In the evening Garth drove us on another game drive. Another leopard screamed across our dusty path. "We're eating vegetarian tonight." He said, tossing several chickens on the braai. Anna pulled one of them off to show him.

"Those aren't vegetables."

"They are in my country." He grabbed the bird back onto the coals. "Jy krap nie aan 'n ander man se vuur nie." *You don't mess around with another man's fire.* We zipped up our tents early.

On the road along the deep dirt of the Magwekwe Sandridge next morning, we came upon a fresh lion kill of a baby elephant. It was another long hot bone-banging slog to a remote torrid hill a long distance away from the Chobe River. Campsite #8 wasn't Garth's first choice of tenting ground and it would slowly become his worst nightmare. The sand was covered in Devil Thorn creeper which played scratch and win with our exposed Teva-clad feet. Our Samil-20 troop carrier starter motor died on the hill and we had to push the Unimog through the dunes downhill to pop the clutch and get it running. Ronnie and I pitched our tent in the most torrid expedition encampment thus far. My enthusiasm for cooking dinner caught him in the throat. I didn't think the chili I prepared was that spicy, but my Kiwi father-in-law had known no picante flavours in his entire lifetime and declared my attempt to broaden this horizon as a gesture of premeditated homicide. We sat around the campfire long into the night. *Copper sun sinking low... Scatterlings and fugitives... Hooded eyes and weary brows... Seek refuge in the night...*

Peering through my camera at the flames, I detected furtive movements on the far side of the fire. It was a dark ghoul with black spots and yellow glowing eyes. I could smell some poor creature's last gasp on its breath.

"There's a hyena." Ronnie sat up in the folding chair beside me. We would often find the four-toed tracks in the surrounding sand in the morning.

"I know." I said. "I can see it through my telephoto." The hyena whooped and giggled and groaned hysterical at my inertia. It seemed far too loud from where it was in my viewfinder.

"You don't have your telephoto." I lowered my camera.

"Oh." Was all I had.

He was two feet away when we ran for our tent flap. *Get these mutts away from me... You know, I don't find this stuff amusing anymore...*

It was well into our fourth day without a wash when the great white hope would no longer respond to a push start. The next two days were marooned on this hill of heat and thorns. It would have been a crucifixion if the trees had been more cypress than acacia. There weren't supposed to be tsetse flies but they hadn't received the memo.

Unlike those in the heads of our hyenas, the light had gone from Garth's eyes. We were stuck. In the evening, he cooked another braai and we retreated into our canvas cavities, serenaded

by the sounds of a zebra stampede, a lion kill, and roars of nearby unidentifiable encounters. *What if I die here?... Who'll be my role model... Now that my role model is gone...*

The Botswana army truck that came to our rescue next morning broke its chain on the first attempt and snuck away in shame. We lolled around in the truck under a tarp through the heat of the midday sun until Pres managed to flag down another large lorry with a cable. The Samil started this time only for Garth to discover it had been left in 4-wheel drive. We left the hill, from devil thorn into dust devils. *Strong wind, strong wind... Many dead, tonight it could be you...*

Herds of elephants in their hundreds roared along the Chobe River. Watching them drinking made me want to kneel and drink with them. We passed kudu and giraffe and water buffalo and zebra. Garth made a pit stop at the Mabele General Dealer so we could pick up some of the Lion lager and Carling Black Label painted on one side of the shack.

At the north-eastern boundary of Chobe National Park, we entered the town of Kasane in triumph. Here at the 'four corners' intersection of Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Namibia's Caprivi Strip, twenty years earlier, Elizabeth Taylor had remarried Richard Burton before divorcing him again ten months later. We were more jubilant.

"What are we doing here?" Wiebke asked.

"Booze cruise." Garth shouted, pulling the Landmaster up to a long boat on a short wharf.

"Jump aboard."

We all jumped but it wasn't aboard. Twelve merry scatterlings launched themselves into the Chobe River like they'd been shot from a canon.

"What about the crocodiles?" Garth asked.

"They'll just have to take their chances." Ronnie flew by his head. Back onboard, we all met Wilson, an excellent guide wearing iridescent green socks. He narrated our excursion past hippos, water buffalo, elephants, Egyptian geese, and Garth's yellow-bellied Nile crocodiles. Ronnie and I sat at the back of the boat sipping a couple of beer, amused at the three Dutch members of our merry band inhaling all the others we left in the cooler. Wiebke had her chair collapse under her.

After the cruise, we piled back onto the Unimog to cross into Zimbabwe and our Victoria Falls campsite and the first shower in five days. Garth produced a double bushveldt version of macaroni and cheese for us and another Drifter's safari group that had joined us. They were new and green and spoiled by their faux Capetown to Victoria Falls adventure, and cut out for a local restaurant halfway through the meal, leaving Ronnie and I to wash dishes for both groups.

Morning found three more warthogs sniffing around our camp kitchen. After breakfast, Ronnie and I expropriated a bathtub to do laundry, and then hiked across a bridge to the next country over. *You are now entering Zambia.*

We made our way carefully along the flat basalt crest of the mile-wide cataract.

"Victoria Falls." Ronnie stared into its splendor.

"Mosi-oa-Tunya." I said.

"What's that?"

"Sotho name." I added. "The Smoke That Thunders."

"Didn't Livingstone discover it?" He asked. "Scenes so lovely it must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight."

“It was here for 200 million years before he arrived.” I remembered the motto inscribed on his statue on the other side when I first came through fifteen years earlier. *Christianity, Commerce and Civilization*.

Even in the spray mist from the cascade, it was blazing hot and I was delighted to arrive at the Devil’s Pool, precariously perched on the edge of the gigantic white water waterfall plummeting into the vast chasm.

I peeled off down to my underwear.

“Wouldn’t swim here if I were you.” Ronnie advised.

“Why not?”

“Don’t see any children playing in this water, do you?”

“Nope.” I plunged into the coolness, submerged and remerged, revived. The current tried to pull me over the edge of the precipice into the gorge below. Out of the corner of one eye, I watched a young black schoolkid in a uniform, weighed down with a satchel full of books, running at full tilt towards us. He stopped beside Ronnie, trying to catch his breath.

“What?” I floated in the freshness.

“I... would... not swim... there.” He stammered.

“Why not?” I asked. He pointed to a place behind me.

“Because that crocodile took my friend three weeks ago.” I turned to find two golden green reptilian eyeballs a foot apart and less than twenty feet away. I didn’t need to be told twice.

It was a long hot walk back along the rift.

“I told you I wouldn’t swim there.” Ronnie couldn’t resist.

Our merry band went out to dine that evening at a carnivorous eatery called the Cattleman’s steakhouse.

“You having the crocodile, mate?” Garth asked.

“Sometimes you eat the crocodile...” I said. We sat around the campfire later, trying to figure out the constellations.

Most of the scatterlings went white water rafting next morning, but Ronnie and Wiebke and I hiked the Zimbabwean side of the cataract and had lunch on the terrace of the Victoria Falls Hotel overlooking Second Gorge and the Victoria Falls Bridge. Beyond the ice cream vendors in red uniforms on their cycle carts, Ronnie and I took a midafternoon helicopter flight. Hovering over the predigital panorama, I couldn’t load the roll of film onto my new Leica camera, and we fell out of love.

But it was a full moon night of candlelit silver service at the Boma restaurant dinner and drum show that evening. Tony surprised us with a rare display of generosity by shouting a round of beer.

“That box of wine must be sherry by now.” He said.

“It’s a raisin in the sun.” I said, chowing down on a wild game feast of ostrich crepes, kudu, and warthog. There was chocolate cake for dessert in honour of Paul’s birthday. Barking dogs and disco serenaded us through the night.

A welcoming sign received us outside the exposition grounds of the Falls Craft Village next morning. *TRADITIONAL DANCING A spectacular display of circumcision rituals... mysterious*

Nyau dancing... spirit costumes... a legend revealed... vibrant war dancing...Book now... Enquiries: Falls Craft Village... phone 4309...

“I want to get my mother a hippo carving but I only have this much change left.” Ronnie opened his palm. There was a Zim dollars’ worth of coins. “And I’ve already asked all the vendors.”

“Ebony or serpentine?” I asked.

“You’ll be lucky to get paper.” He said. I took the coins and re-entered the village. I found all the carvers eating lunch behind a reed fence.

“What do you want?” Asked the one with the least food in his mouth.

“Who’ll sell me a stone hippo for this much money?” I asked. They all rose as one nation. Back outside I handed the sculpture to Ronnie.

“How’s you do that?” He asked. I told him of my Ashkenazi merchant lineage.

And then Garth pointed our troop carrier back south towards Nata Sanctuary. We almost didn’t make it. The beast sprung a fuel line leak (probably from the same overheated engine that had lit Ronnie’s knapsack on fire at least twice). Garth had worked through his last ball point pen sleeve to reconnect the lines before he volunteered me to hitch back into town for help. It was like old times. Half an hour later, I rediscovered myself in the back of a half-ton full of dead guinea fowl, cut straw, tyres and black guys whipping through the Africa night. Eventually flagged down another Drifter’s Unimog and turned him around. We passed Garth and the scatterlings making it into Jack’s Camp. Reunited, I threw a mat and my bags outside an A-frame and went for a shower. Refreshed,

I found the boys at the bar and sat between Ron and a fellow named Nigel for dinner. “What do you do?” I asked.

“I own this place.”

“OK.” He and Ronnie started talking rugby.

“Our bokke beat you bad, Rooinek.” Nigel said.

“Only because you poisoned our food, Crunchie.” Ronnie countered. And the battle was rejoined. I excused myself for the company of the mosquitos in our A-frame. German sleeping bags parachuted and flashlights dropped around me all night long.

In the morning, we all climbed aboard the bus back to Jo’berg, stopping only for breakfast at a Great Western hotel. The Afrikaner bus driver and his maasie were vintage South Africa. We arrived at Drifters Inn around 8 p.m. and retraced our path back to Baron & Archer for lamb shanks and wine that wasn’t sherry. One day in Johannesburg, and already the tribe was rebuilt, the house and soul restored.

Our last full day in the City of Gold began developing our memories at a photo shop in Cresta Shopping centre. Our final dinner ended at Carnivores, an African twist on the Argentinian churrascaria. Black waiters with aprons and straw hats sang in harmony. They brought great hunks of kudu, hippo, warthog, impala, eland, and wildebeest on Masai spears from a massive central circular barbeque inferno until we lowered our table flag in surrender.

Ronnie and I said farewell to Ivan in the morning, and to each other at the Johannesburg airport. I remember loudspeakers reverberating in German during my Frankfurt layover, and then nothing until I arrived home.

Pliny the Elder once noted that there is always something new out of Africa. But since my father-in-law safari not much of it has been good. Botswana has been devastated by drought and desertification. Twenty per cent of its population is infected with HIV/AIDS. The happy tribes of San Bushmen depicted in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* have been forcibly relocated on reservations far from their traditional hunting and gathering lands, which turned out to lie in the middle of the world's richest diamond field.

The glass bottle that the film's loincloth-clad hero threw off the cliff of God's Window to save his tribe from divisive conflict has returned by thousands of others filled with firewater and fury. They live in tubercular squalor on handouts of cornmeal and contempt.

Beginning in April of 2019, poaching rings organized by Chinese traders have slaughtered 46 Moremi Reserve rhinos in less than 10 months, ten percent of all the rhinos in Botswana. The insatiable demand for rhino horn fetches up to \$60,000/kg. ReconAfrica, a Canadian petroleum exploration company exploiting the oil deposits in 'Kavango Basin' sedimentary rocks insists its activities will have no 'environmental impact', like the illegal muddy mining cyanide annihilation of the Tapajos River in Bolivia. The value of the Tapajos Gold stock I bought on landing in Johannesburg soared high into the stratosphere before plummeting back into the ground the day I landed back in Vancouver. There is karma in the Kalahari.

And Ronnie? I think he had the time of his life on that safari. He admitted as much to his younger brother but he never told me. Not long after I gave him his stuffed warthog, a hemorrhage blew a hole in his head where the untreated hypertension lived.

In the deep interior of the Okavango Delta, the annual rising flood waters sweep the canvas clean every year; this year's landscape will only continue to exist in next year's memory.

And we are the scatterlings of Africa... On a journey to the stars... Far below, we leave forever... Dreams of what we were...