

Singer

Neil Roberts

A crocodile of schoolchildren, boys and girls in their early teens, all of them uniformed in crisply ironed yellow shirts and black trousers or skirts, was walking by the road, between the bare parched hills, from nowhere visible to nowhere visible. It was an incongruous but comforting sight on the lonely drive from one game reserve to the next.

The entrance to the reserve was guarded by a town of small shacks and dirt roads. A few small groups of people were standing listlessly and I was unnerved as I drove by them, they stared at me without acknowledgement, even I felt with hostility, and for the first time I doubted my wisdom in returning to Africa alone, my first trip since Joe died. But I was reassured by the friendly greeting of the warden at the gate.

At this place I had chosen to be completely alone, in an isolated cabin unfenced from the bush. It was a magical place, a wooden frame with a thatched roof and canvas sides that could be rolled up, beside a bend in the river. Beyond the bend red cliffs rose sharply from the water's edge. Unfenced and alone, under the African sun and the African stars—at last I felt that I was touching Africa. 'Paradise,' an earlier visitor had written in the guest book and, in confirmation, as I sat with my lunch outside the cabin, a bird with sky-blue bill and fiery tail twice the length of its body flew into the nearest tree—a paradise flycatcher.

Footprints of many different animals, none of which I could identify, patterned the dust, and another guest had written that, as he walked at night to the toilet, fifty metres away and fenced with stakes, a leopard had bounded out in front of him.

In the afternoon I drove in search of wild animals. Passing through a wooded area I saw large shapes moving ahead of me and stopped the car. They were nyala, a small group on one side of the road and a single male on the other. The male is the most glamorous of antelopes, with his long black shaggy coat, yellow gaiters, swept-back horns and white crest all along his back. The single male's crest was raised, bristling, like an angry cat. I saw that the group consisted of another male, a female and three or four young. The two males stalked very slowly towards each other, ritualistically, like Noh actors, then the single male made a sudden rush and the other retreated. But he came back, and the slow dance followed by sudden rush was repeated, again and again, without ever touching. I didn't stay to see the outcome, and couldn't work out which of the males was in possession and which was the intruder.

At evening, darkness descended suddenly. I made a campfire and ate my supper watching fireflies dancing along the water, listening to an owl hooting in the tree above me. Joe had loved the African wildlife, but in our visits together we had never been as free and alone as this. I wished for his sake that he could be here, but I was happy for the first time since he died. As I turned to go back into the cabin a bush-baby stared at me from the threshold, its eyes full of reflected moonlight. A visit not to be encouraged, unfortunately.

A guided walk each morning was part of the package. At seven I was up, enjoying the sensation of the sun driving off the overnight chill, looking at the new footprints that had appeared overnight, and I saw a tiny man with a rifle slung over his shoulder, approaching the cabin.

'Good morning madam, my name is Simon.'

Fiction

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'My name is Frances.' I shook his hand. His smiling, gentle manners made the gun incongruous. 'Have you ever had to use it?' I asked.

'To frighten black rhino. Not to kill.'

I knew that black rhino were more dangerous to people than the white, as well as much rarer. The chance of seeing them was one of the attractions of this place.

'And if it isn't frightened off? Would you have to kill it then?'

'Yes, yes. Last week, in another park, a black rhino killed a ranger. He was trying to protect his tourists.'

The thought that it might come down to Simon's life or the rhino's dampened my pleasure in our little stroll. There was also something about 'trying to protect his tourists' that unsettled me. It conferred on little Simon the aura of knightly service, whereas I was just a paying customer. Walking freely in the reserve was a privilege granted by the guide with his rifle.

Despite the warm sunshine Simon kept snuffling and snorting, saying he didn't feel well. But he had keen eyes and ears, he showed me the difference between the dung of black rhinos, white rhinos and elephants by the traces of food left in it, and he knew the call of every bird. He looked at the fresh tracks outside my cabin and told me that giraffes and warthogs had visited me in the night. He spoke good English with a strong accent, saying the names of the birds precisely, and repeating them several times, as if he were committing them to memory.

'Did you learn all about the animals when you were a child?' I asked.

'No, when I train as a guide. I have recordings of birdsong, I play them many times, remember them.'

The little birds perched on the antelopes' backs were oxpeckers, he said. 'They eat the ticks of the animals. When they bring the big animals here they bring oxpeckers in crates so the animals don't suffer from the ticks.'

We came upon some stones arranged like the outline of a building.

'Was there a building here?'

'Yes, this was a kraal.'

'People lived here?'

'Yes, before the park.'

'And you? Did you live here?'

'I lived in the park till fifteen. Over there.' He gestured vaguely to distant hills. He must be fifty then. He looked much younger. 'When they make the park they move the people off.'

There was something lying in the grass that wasn't stone. I looked more closely: it was rusty metal. I thought I recognised it but couldn't believe it. I picked it up, it was heavy, shaped like a hammer with a massive head. Something was engraved on it, still legible through the rust: 'SINGER'. 'It's a sewing machine!' I exclaimed.

Simon looked at it. 'Yes. A sewing machine. It belonged to the people who lived on this kraal.'

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I had one just like it, though I hadn't used it for years. It had belonged to my mother. Now this one was staining my hands with its rust. I felt tears pricking in my eyes.
'You lived on a kraal like this?'
'Like this, yes.'
'And did your mother have a sewing machine like this?'
'Yes, just like this. But she didn't leave it here. She took it away when we moved.'

His tone, whether he was talking about his family's displacement or learning the songs of birds, was equally matter-of-fact. Was it just because he was speaking a learned language that I could detect no regret, nostalgia or bitterness?

'Did the people get any compensation?'
'Everybody was promised 10,000 rand, but we still don't get it.'
'And where were the people moved to?'

'To Nshanwe.' This was the town at the park gate.

I stared at the piece of rusty metal in my hand. A discarded, broken piece of machinery— maybe it had been thrown away even before the people were moved. Nothing in the world less numinous, not even any pathos in it really, the stuff of a million landfills. Yet somehow it altered the whole landscape.

When we parted I gave Simon what I hoped was a large tip.

I had lunch by the river again and took another drive. A family of elephants, the most I had ever seen together, about forty, was making its way purposefully in the direction I was driving, in a line, all sizes and ages from stately matriarchs to tiny babies. The valley turned into a muddy pan, and I stopped here, waiting for the elephants to arrive. They emerged in small groups and immediately started flinging mud over themselves with their trunks, and trumpeting with delight. More and more joined in, ever more crowded, till all forty were jammed together like commuters, struggling to cover themselves in mud, but completely peaceful. Then suddenly, after half an hour, they trooped back the way they had come.

As I drove out through the park gate the next morning, the friendly ranger waved to me. But almost immediately I was again in the desolate little town, about which I now knew a little more, but what I knew wasn't reassuring. It was nothing like the Zulu villages I had spotted from the road, with their round huts and straw roofs. These were flat-roofed buildings made of concrete slabs, mostly cracked, crumbling and unrepaired. Somewhere in the village there must have been a shop, and maybe a bar, but these facilities were indistinguishable behind the blank grey facades. The sun was high, there was no shadow, the same harsh light everywhere.

This time I saw ahead of me a group of men in the middle of the road. For some reason I didn't want to find out if they would make way for me, and impulsively I turned off into a side-street, hoping there was a way round. Straight away I realised this was a dead-end, the dirt street little more than a ribbon of earth between weeds, losing itself after fifty metres in a scrubby field. Before I had time to reverse I felt a thump somewhere in front of me. I was puzzled—I hadn't hit anything. Could some animal have run in front of me without my seeing? Here, outside the park gates, it could only be a dog, and it would probably belong to somebody.

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Unwillingly I opened the door and got out. I was relieved to see no animal twitching under my wheel. I had a flat tyre—a piece of wood with rusty nails had been left in the road. I didn't suspect malice—who would have expected a stranger to turn into this track?—and I wasn't fearful of physical danger. This wasn't a gang-ridden township but a rural village through which thousands of tourists travelled, even if they didn't stop as I, betrayingly, had done. But I just wanted to get out of this place where I felt more and more I shouldn't be, and now I had to stay and expose myself while I changed the wheel.

Luckily, I could do this—well, it wasn't luck exactly, I wouldn't have taken this trip alone without such a basic skill as that. I was confident that I could physically extract myself from this fix, but as I opened the boot of the car and took out the jack and wheel-wrench the group who had been blocking my way on the main road gathered around me. I still wasn't physically afraid but I started trembling. I was becoming the helpless widow woman that I was taking this trip to prove I wasn't. Absurdly I wished that Simon would appear. Although the road, or track, was very narrow there was a weedy expanse in front of the three or four houses on each side. From this distance a young woman, carrying a baby, was watching the exotic scene. I wondered if she had a Singer sewing machine in her house.

It was a group of four men who gathered round me. As with Simon I couldn't accurately judge their ages but they might have been a father and three sons. The main sign of age in the one I thought of as the father was the poor state of his teeth. I smiled at them, said hello and something about being sorry to break down in the village. There was nothing menacing about them but they didn't smile back. They just kept staring at me. I had been before among people with whom I didn't share a language, but I was used to more attempt at human contact than this. I was trembling even more as I knelt down and tried to fix the jack in position.

Then the older man suddenly said something in what I assumed to be Zulu and grasped the other end of the wheel-wrench that I held in my hand. I let go of it, stood up and stepped back, still smiling but increasing my distance from all of them. The older man rapidly removed the wheel with the burst tyre while one of the younger ones took the spare wheel out of the boot. I felt almost taken prisoner, but also relieved now that the attention of the whole group was on the task, not on me. I just stood there sweating in the sun, which was somehow more oppressive here than in the park a few miles away.

When the new wheel was in place and the tyre pumped up I said 'Thank you', assuming that they knew enough English to understand this. I reasoned that I should give them more money than I had given Simon, since he was already paid for his work. This seemed to be acceptable, but still none of the men smiled. They melted away and, by the time I had manoeuvred to get back on the main road, it was empty.

I pursued my way to the next reserve, a little less enthusiastically than before. The loneliness swallowed me up again, I was glad of it.

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