

The Wanderers

Tales of Wandering in the
African Bush



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For Gerhard



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The Journey



CHAPTER 1

It was around two o'clock in the afternoon. The rains had not yet come, and the Zambezi Valley was dry and dusty and seething with heat and the endless screams of cicadas. Gerhard and I had taken refuge under a clump of bush willow that had enough leaves left to cast a pool of cool shadow. We were slurping the tea we had just brewed, and swatting at the tsetse, each trying to cope with a numbing drowsiness from the heat and the effects of a relentless old male lion that had kept us company for most of last night around our roadside camp.

Running across our front was a bush airstrip, its far western end twisting in the mirage. Looking out over it stirred some old memories, and I felt the adrenaline froth at the base of my chest as I reflected on how it once must have been here—tense with action, filled with the whip of rotor blades, the images of paratroopers running through the dusty haze to their transports, and the stutter of the Dakota's twin engines as it taxied out . . . but now it was deserted and silent and hot. The mopane trees had pushed their branches into the sun-filled space, and here and there tufts of grass had taken root in the unforgiving gravel surface. Few pilots would grant it airstrip status.

We had started out from Pretoria two days earlier. We took the northern highway through the Springbok Flats and the Waterberg hill country, and then through the dry bush land north of Polokwane. We had tea and scones on the terrace of the Clouds End Hotel in the Soutpansberg, enjoying the beautiful panorama of the savanna stretching southward till it hazed into the vast sky. Then we droned

on, the Land Cruiser laboring through the steep valleys of the berg, finally stumbling, panting, onto the endless dry northern mopane plains toward the Limpopo.

After jostling our way through a crowded border, we had just a short drive through the Zimbabwe lowveld before we reached the Nuanetsi Valley. We spent the night at the Lion and Elephant Inn on the bank of the Bubi River. It was our usual stopover on trips like these—a basic but pleasant enough hotel (motel), its thatched double rondavels cool in white and green on the lawns under giant acacias. Moreover, the locals that came in for sundowners usually made interesting conversation, and presented the off chance of getting a hunt organized somewhere in the valley.

The next day we climbed up to the grass plains of the Zimbabwe highlands toward Harare, and from there northward toward Mushumbi. At some point the tar gave way to a strip road (only two tracks surfaced), finally giving up altogether and leaving us on a narrow dirt road not much more than a track. By sunset we had dropped into the Zambezi Valley, and, dusty and tired from being rattled and knocked around in the old Land Cruiser, we drove some five hundred yards off the road into the bush and slung our hammocks for the night—oblivious, of course, to the presence of the old lion, which subsequently made it his business to prowl and grunt around the camp, eventually having us resign ourselves, cursing, to make do in the cramped confines of the Land Cruiser cabin.

Sitting there sleepless and uncomfortable, we were reminded of a similar situation we had been in during an expedition we had made into Botswana in an ancient little Series II Land Rover during the early 1970s. We were heading out to explore the Okavango area, and on the second day of our journey, some way past Gweta on the edge of the Makgadikgadi Pans, the setting sun told us it was time to make camp. The road between Nata and

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Maun, now a high-speed tar road, was then just a track that got dragged smooth with old tires strung behind a farm tractor once a month or so, and one couldn't average much more than about twenty-five miles per hour on it. Gweta, now a sizable little town sporting some paved streets, then consisted of just one or two small general-purpose shops and a collection of mud huts on either side of the track.

We had driven away from the road a few hundred yards and found a nice tree under which to make camp. There were no humans for miles, but a lot of sign of game. We gathered a large pile of wood for the night, and once we had everything organized we settled down to grill some meat we had bought in Francistown that morning.

We were busy chatting away unconcernedly when I noticed something moving just beyond the glow of the camp. We promptly got out our Winchester spotlights (the classic 1960s/1970s model with the matte-black belt-mounted battery pack and detachable lamp that could be fastened to the forehead with an elastic band, which we firmly believed to be the only type of spotlight worthy of our type of adventuring) and probed the darkness. But we couldn't see anything, so we went back to our routine. We were little more than boys fresh out of secondary school at the time, and although we had both spent a lot of time in the veld, we were still relatively inexperienced, and we decided that it must have been my imagination.

But soon Gerhard also noticed a vague shape moving, and then there was a deep growl. We hastily moved closer to the fire and trained our spotlights in the general direction. This time we briefly caught at least three pairs of wide-set eyes in the beams. We were now quite certain that there were lions around the camp.

Partly out of ignorance, partly out of misplaced youthful bravado, and partly because we were really excited to be out alone in the wild, and actually (foolishly) thrilled at being surrounded by lions, we convinced each other that the fire would keep them away. We promptly added some wood and continued with our activities, albeit now with considerable unease, and carefully restricting our movements to the area between the fire and the vehicle.



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Gerhard had smuggled an old single-barrel bolt-action 12-gauge shotgun across the border, for which we had bought some No. 3 shot for the odd guinea fowl we might come across, and some slugs for when things got really nasty. We placed that handy on the Land Rover's mudguard, loaded with No. 3 shot, which we decided would be sufficient discouragement for a foolishly inquisitive lion.

What we did not understand was that there was regular contact between these lions, living, as it were, on the fringes of human habitation, and the odd human in the area, and that they were quite used to humans and not averse to prey on them when the opportunity presented itself. We also had not yet experienced how the same lions that would run away from a person during the day could become fearlessly predatory when it got dark.

We were constantly aware of them, prowling and occasionally grunting around the camp as we had our meal, sitting with our backs against the vehicle and facing the fire. The occasional probe with a spotlight revealed that there were probably about four or five, which should have been another warning sign to us.

We both expected them to leave after a while, and when they didn't we became more uncertain and scared, but neither was prepared to admit it and suggest that we seek the safety of the cab. So we sat chatting bravely but uneasily for a while, the shotgun now lying across Gerhard's lap.

As the evening progressed the lions seemed to get bolder and noisier, coming closer to the fire so that we frequently could make out the brief suggestion of one in the glow. We were just beginning to wonder if we shouldn't depart for the cab when suddenly one female charged right into the light circle, growling—almost barking—fiercely! We were on our feet, shouting wildly, and Gerhard let her have it with the shotgun!

We don't know how much damage was done, but this unexpected fierce resistance from a normally fearful prey dented the collective self-confidence of the troupe a bit, and they retreated. It was now quiet and restful around our fire, but we had had enough. We were finally ready to admit that it was damn scary to be stalked by a determined pride of lions, and that the cab



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was clearly the sensible option. Later, when we were more experienced, we knew that we had been nothing but embarrassingly stupid that night.

Now we were sitting on the edge of this airstrip some miles south of the Zambezi River, close to the point where Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique meet, waiting for Frank to arrive. We had met Frank in a Sandton pub about eight weeks earlier. Gerhard and I immediately liked him. He looked completely out of place in that pretentious environment—lean and tough and a bit jagged, like a rawhide thong with a bit of hair left on it on display in a fancy fashion shop. He had been introduced by the Johannesburg-based agent of Game Trackers, the safari outfit we were going to hunt with. Frank was a freelance professional hunter who moonlighted for large safari outfits, but sometimes contracted directly with a client and then made a deal with some outfit to hunt with his client in their area.

This time he was flying in an American client for whom he had secured an elephant hunt in the concession of an outfitter named Danny. Danny was operating the concession area inside Mozambique just east of the Zimbabwe border, stretching from the Zambezi southward for some fifty miles. We had to pass through his concession to get to the Game Trackers one, which bordered Danny's to the west, and then ran eastward along the Zambezi for some sixty miles or so, and southward more or less to Zimbabwe's northern border—at least, this was the theory, and it may even have been recorded in some document in a dusty file far, far away in Maputo. But in bush as remote and as vast as this, concession borders were largely irrelevant, as were almost all other rules and laws. All that really counted were the realities of the bush and the honor (or lack thereof) of the men on the ground.

Frank's problems started when his client inquired about the inbound and outbound journeys. Frank had barely been able to convince him that it was OK to fly in with his little Cessna to a bush airstrip that was not on any map, but it was totally beyond his powers of persuasion to get the chap to agree that they

would then be going down the Zambezi in a dugout canoe propelled by a mini outboard motor slung on the side. He was met with flat refusal. The client informed Frank that there were hippos and crocs in African rivers, and what was more, hippos were “responsible for most deaths by mauling in the African wilds,” and “a canoe was not the proper vessel to go on them infested rivers.”

No amount of reassurance or claims to local knowledge that Frank could offer would change his client’s mind—and I guess one has to grant (with a smile) that he was not incorrect. Frank was worried he wouldn’t be able to fit the rather big chap and all his paraphernalia in the narrow and devilishly unstable dugout anyway.

Roads in the area were nonexistent, and both outfitters operating in the area (Danny and Game Trackers) preferred using dugouts along the Zambezi— it made cutting and maintaining roads unnecessary, and it was a lot quicker than struggling through the bush by vehicle.

So we made a deal with Frank: We would give him and his client a ride to Danny’s camp from the airstrip, and in return he would show us how to get there. We had planned to go to Danny’s camp (which we thought to be about halfway to where we were going to hunt) to overnight and to confirm our direction. But we were unsure of its exact position, and Frank, having the advantage of the aerial view, and having hunted with Danny before, could be of assistance.

We (Gerhard and I) did not have the canoe option anyway, because the deal with Game Trackers was that we would bring our own safari, so we simply had to drive in. We had often operated like this in the past—bringing our own vehicle, gear, and food, and operating more or less on our own, even when hunting in a concession area. We had come to know a few operators quite well over the years, and we would take some of the game they had left on their license at the end of the season on such a special deal. We actually preferred operating in this fashion, around the fringes of the organized establishment, playing by our own rules.

Gerhard had stumbled across Dave, the South African agent for Game Trackers, by coincidence when the latter came around to buy safari equipment Gerhard was manufacturing in his little factory outside Pretoria. They started talking, and Dave, being rather eager to impress Gerhard with his



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status as a real bush man, offered lots of details about Game Trackers. Gerhard let him talk, and after a few well-placed questions, he smelled a deal.

Game Trackers was clearly in trouble. This was their first year in operation. It was almost the end of the season, and they had not secured a single hunt. Their American agent (who was also a shareholder, and responsible for filling their hunts) had arrived to shoot several animals in the concession, but had not been able to send them a single client, and with reason: Game Trackers had no proven track record, and American hunters were skeptical and worried about the war situation that they suspected (partly correctly) had not yet been cleared up completely.

At that time the bush war between RENAMO and FRELIMO in Mozambique had fizzled to endless bickering between their leaders at fancy venues while their followers drifted, lawless and frustrated, around the fringes of the tattered society in search of the nice things they thought they were now entitled to.

Game Trackers badly needed to demonstrate that they were able to deliver successful hunts. They needed photographs of hunters posing with their trophies to wave around at the hunting conventions that were soon coming up in the States. So Gerhard called me, and we made a deal with them. We would bring our own safari (vehicle, bush equipment, food, and so on). They would give us the use of their camp (staffed) and a professional hunter for a twenty-day period. We would pay them only the trophy fees for an elephant and a buffalo each, as well as the PH fee. It would not cost them anything more than they were already spending in operating expenses, and hopefully they would get to prove, with some nice photographs, that they had had successful hunts.

Our wait for Frank was getting a bit long. It reminded me of a similar wait some years earlier on a brooding-hot morning in the southeast of Zimbabwe. We had been hunting elephant in a vast stretch of sand veld to the south of the Gonarezhou Game reserve. There were several good bush tracks running through the area, and we used them to patrol the area for

fresh tracks. It was a bit of a game of chance, but if we got lucky it could save us a lot of walking, we reasoned.

But the area was huge, and it took a lot of driving, and after a time we were beginning to run low on petrol. We decided we had to replenish our supply. We had passed a little roadside shop on our way into the area that had, to our surprise and delight, a 1940s-era hand-operated petrol pump with twin glass measuring cylinders—a real classic, still standing tall despite its faded red paint and dented body.

We loaded our forty-four-gallon drum (brought along for extra petrol) and left our camp at dawn, reaching the little shop just before noon. It turned out that they had run out of petrol, but we were given eager assurances by the proprietor, clearly not wanting to forego the opportunity of selling so much petrol in a single transaction, that “the truck it is coming.” We decided it was probably worth waiting for a while, and we settled down in our chairs under the only reasonable tree in the area (a wild olive, if I recall correctly) to brew some tea.

Our host, a large, sweaty man with the front of his shirt hanging over his bulging tummy like a tent, sent us each a can of lukewarm Coke “on the house” just to show how generous he was toward his really big customers. The tracker we had brought along was a chap called Nyani. He was not the best tracker I had ever worked with, but he was a very pleasant chap with a brilliant smile and laughing eyes, and, like most Zimbabweans, able to speak good English. He was delighted because he ended up scoring the Cokes.

Once we had settled down with our tea, I had the opportunity to study our surroundings with more attention to detail. It is strange how the average Western mind tends to filter out all but the information directly connected to the mission or task at hand, and how we then often miss a lot of charming detail. Our tree was about sixty or so paces away from the shop, on the opposite side of a dusty track running eastward into the oblivion of the tribal area. The area around us was bare and dust-trodden except for a few defiant gray shrubs and faded mounds of donkey dung deposited by the few rather scrawny-looking specimens (even by donkey standards) that

hung around listlessly for reasons unknown, because there certainly was nothing for them to eat.

The little shop was every bit as classic as the petrol pump. It offered anything from agricultural equipment and bicycle spares to warm beer and patent medicine, all safely ensconced behind a counter with a sturdy wire mesh barrier stretching from its countertop right up to the bare corrugated iron sheets of its roof. Its faded sign hanging from one corner, and its cracked front veranda and paint-starved walls with the red bricks showing here and there where the plaster had fallen off, testified that it had not seen any maintenance since being taken over by the present owner. (The previous owner had departed for South Africa or England or such.)

Besides the usual sunglasses-sporting loafers posturing self-importantly on the front porch and a noisy group of men playing some game on the cement floor, oiled by generous quantities of beer, there were several resigned-looking people sitting in the narrow strip of shade along one wall. They all had bundles of stuff with them; one had a small wood and wire mesh cage with three chickens in it.

“Nyani, what are those people against the wall doing here?” I asked.

“They are waiting for the bus to come, sir.” (Such delightful manners, most of those Zimbabwean chaps.)

“Ah, and when is the bus coming?”

“The bus is coming, sir”—a white, matter-of-fact smile.

I looked down the dusty track expectantly, but then realized that his answer didn’t mean that arrival was imminent, just that it was expected, possibly this hour, possibly today, possibly tomorrow or the next day—at some time in the future.

“Nyani, the petrol truck—when do you think it is coming?”

“Ah, but it is coming, sir.” The smile now showed a hint of uncertainty.

I turned to Gerhard and said, “You know what all of this means? It means that bloody truck could be arriving any time between now and next week.”

Gerhard hadn’t been paying much attention to my and Nyani’s discussion, but he paid a lot of attention to my last remark.

“Damn, we’d better make another plan,” he said indignantly.

“*Hmm*. Nyani, where else can we get petrol?” I inquired.

“Maybe we can get it at Mwenezi, sir.”

“OK. How long will it take to drive there?”

He screwed his face into intense concentration. “*Uh*, maybe it can take three hours, sir.”

“*Hmm*. Sounds like about forty to fifty miles,” I quickly calculated.

“S---, that’s quite a way. Do you think we can make it with the petrol we have in the tank?” Gerhard asked.

“Risky,” I said, adding, “and if we got stuck between here and Mwenezi we’d be in real trouble. It could take days before we can get going again. But you know, I’m just thinking of something. Once, when I was a boy, I had to help out my great uncle—my grandfather’s brother—on his farm. He farmed next door to us, and he would often send for me to come and help him, actually just to have someone convenient to send around. He had to deliver a load of hay, but his old GMC lorry was too low on petrol to make it to the nearest filling station. So my great uncle simply started it up and let it run warm, and then he added some diesel into the tank—just enough to get to the petrol station. The old truck was stuttering a bit, but as long as one kept the revs up it went.”

Gerhard looked at me uncertainly, his eyes narrowed in disbelief. “You sure that wouldn’t damage the engine?”

He softened his suspicions when he realized I wouldn’t really do anything to jeopardize our vehicle.

“Not really. Of course if there was too much diesel in the petrol, it would simply not run.”

“OK. Well, we don’t have any diesel,” he said, almost with relief.

“No, but maybe they have some at the store.”

“OK, let’s try!” Gerhard said gamely.

Our generous host took the news that the big petrol deal was off rather badly. He couldn’t understand why on earth we were in such a hurry—after all, the truck was about to arrive anyway. He was absolutely convinced it was in our best interests to stay and wait. But we discovered to our (my)