

Off The Road – The Journey Begins

Prologue

Nine months into my first year of college, my girlfriend dumped me. Yes, it was cause for heartbreak, albeit temporarily. Part of me was relieved. Deep down we both knew that we were too different to last long term. Now I was free!

“All the single ladies - all the single ladies...” It seemed longer, but my bachelorhood lasted a paltry 5 weeks. I had intended to play the field until my heart had healed enough to get serious again, but, as John Lennon famously once said: “Life is what happens while you’re busy making plans.”

Along came Jaqueline.

One fine day, while sitting on the dining hall steps, watching the world go by and admiring the talent pool, she approached me. At first, I thought she was going to alter course and go to the top of the stairs, but I couldn’t think of a reason why she needed to. It led nowhere. Nope, she made a beeline for me and hurriedly handed me an envelope, turned on her heels and fled, before I could even react. Curious, I opened the envelope and pulled out a *Garfield the Cat* birthday card, which was all the rage back then. It was completely blank. No writing – nothing. Even more curious.

Jaqueline had been on my radar for a few weeks. She was a good-looking, confident girl with a take charge attitude. A little bit intimidating at the time, me still licking my wounds. She was a natural born leader. Very smart, assertive, and sexy to boot. As was the fashion at the time, she wore her brown hair in a perm. To be honest, there were so many desperate single ladies that, up until that moment, I had no intention of pursuing Jaqueline. She had seemed like an untouchable. Why would I take the risk of rejection when I had so many easier options? I was intrigued. What had seemed like Mount Everest was now just a hill. She had clearly signalled her intent and I would be a fool not to follow her lead. It was unusual, for me at least, to have the girl take the initiative, but at least now I knew that she WAS touchable.

We started dating two weeks later, and a year later moved in together. Deciding that I could earn more money elsewhere, I left teaching and went to work in the hospitality industry. My new job was more than two hours from the city, but we decided that the now long-distance relationship would only be temporary, Jaqueline having put in a transfer for the following school year. I have had mixed results with subsequent long-distance relationships, but ours was great. Things were simpler before the internet. You had to trust your partner more. Both of us were outrageous flirts. We had a tacit agreement that we could flirt with the opposite sex – but nothing further. We considered it healthy for our relationship. And it was. But it was a tightrope. If I ignored her for too long when we were in a bar or at a party, she would find some guy and really push the limits until I showed her some attention. On one occasion, I drank a bit too much and ended up in a bar fight. Nothing serious though.

I got into a routine. Every day (I worked nightshift), I would walk 3km along the beach to the nearest payphone to check in with her. Those 6km a day kept me slim and trim. Once or twice a month, she would come and spend the weekend with me. I had a house to myself in the staff complex (the single guys had to share), only a few hundred metres from the beach and situated next to a beach resort. In fact, the resort owned the land we stayed on, so we had use of all their facilities. It was very scenic. In every direction was palm trees, blue gum trees are thick bush, except if you looked east, where a panoramic vista of the coast unfolded before your eyes. Postcard beautiful. We even had our own swamp, which was lovely to look at but seemed to attract cars. More than one (less than sober) driver had 'parked' their car in the swamp. The resident dogs loved it too. They would go frolic in the swamp and then come wipe themselves against my curtains. Jaqueline was an avid gardener. She persuaded me to establish a garden on the bare patch of grass I called a front lawn. Which I did.

During her visits, we would attend various social gatherings and she would keep close to me, sending clear signals to any single ladies that I was taken. In the summer of '89, being a teacher, she was on summer break for 5 weeks and spending a few weeks with me before going to spend time with her mom. Summer was my busy time at work. As I worked in the hospitality industry, I sometimes had to work double shifts. So, I tried to make the most of my free time. At every opportunity, the off-duty staff would congregate around the pool with cooler boxes filled with beer and meat. We splashed around in the pool, danced the Lambada, and swam in the ocean. Someone always had a frisbee, and I had my surfboard, although I rarely surfed after drinking.

The mood was positive. The Cold War had ended, and the Berlin wall had come crashing down. Communism was being abandoned by Soviet States. There was hope in the air. It seemed that the world was heading in the right direction. In South Africa, we welcomed our new State President, FW De Klerk, who was to later dismantle apartheid and serve as the last state President before Nelson Mandela became the first President of the new South Africa in May 1994. He had recently visited Nelson Mandela in prison and had also released Walter Sisulu from prison.

It was on one of these blissful summer days by the pool that it happened. In true South African tradition, I was standing around the braai (BBQ), beer in hand, talking crap with my colleagues. Beautiful young ladies in skimpy bikinis were everywhere. I had left Jaqueline in the pool. Like me, she was a fish. She loved water. I would glance over my shoulder every now and then to check that she was OK. By that, I mean grumpy – or not grumpy. She crooked a finger at me and beckoned me to join her in the pool.

"Goodie," I thought, "she wants me to come and give her some loving."

She was in the crucifix position – two arms outstretched, either side of her, on the lip of the pool, and she was leaning her back against the side of the pool. I chugged my beer down and waded into the pool, looking forward to what lay ahead. She gave me her naughtiest smile and looked at me with her big brown come-to-bed eyes. She wrapped her arms around my waist, and I felt the bulge of expectation rising within my swimming trunks. I was indeed a lucky man. Like a water ninja, she somehow turned me 180 degrees. I was now pressed up

against the side of the pool. She disengaged her arms from around my waist and put her palms flat against the pool wall – one on either side of my head.

“Oh fuck,” I thought, panicking, “what have I done now?”

“We’re getting married,” she said, almost matter-of-factly. It was not a suggestion.

We had never discussed the future. I had always considered that we were too young to start planning our lives. I was enjoying the ride. Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free? I had been faithful to her and never strayed, but what did I know about love and commitment? The only other relationship I had ever had had ended in heartbreak. I wasn’t sure if my feelings for her constituted love. But did one need love? Love was relatively new concept. Up until the last few centuries, people got married either for status, power or financial security. I guess that was the most important thing. Treat your partner with respect and do no harm.

Durban was full of Hindus, and I had attended a few Hindu weddings with my parents. They were generally arranged marriages, yet they seemed to work. If both partners just treated the other one with respect and was loyal, it seemed that love would sprout naturally.

All of these thoughts took a millisecond to pass through my synapses, and, having swiftly decided that love might possibly exist, but confident that, if it did not, it would eventually take root, I responded.

“Ok,” I said meekly. And that was that. We were going to get married!

Later that evening, I asked her what wedding planning responsibilities she was giving to me.

‘None. Just write the checks.’

“Ok,” I replied meekly.

We were married the following year. The year that the ANC was unbanned, and, in hindsight, the beginning of the end for South Africa.

When I told my friends and family that I was getting married, I received lots of advice. Most of it positive. Some – not so positive. My older, married relatives had all got married at an early age. If I recall correctly, my father was married at 22, yet was wise enough not to have kids before he was almost 30. This group seemed divided on the cost/benefit of marriage. Some considered it beneficial to have two incomes, and some rued the fact that they could have still been single and enjoying their freedom, without having to support a family. The latter group advised me that I was making a mistake. “Too young,” they cried. “You’re making a mistake, “they chorused. “Go sow your seed and travel the world.”

Parents, teachers, relatives, and elders are eager to give advice. They have the benefit of hindsight. They have made mistakes. Most people will agree that making mistakes is one of the most important ways that we learn. But at what cost? If the mistake is too great, is the lesson learned worth it? I know that older people mean well. They just want to prevent the

youngsters from repeating the mistakes that they made. The thing about young people though is that they think they know everything. Later in life, when I had kids, I remember how frustrated I used to get when my advice was usually met with “I know, Dad.” Youngsters believe that they know everything.

I was only 26, still a youngster. I did listen attentively to all advice given, and I never responded with “I know,” but I reckoned that, despite my reservations about getting married at 26, I would at least try and make the marriage work. My feelings for Jaqueline were very strong. Perhaps one could call it love. Who knows? Women and love were complex subjects for men. Not easy to understand.

One of my colleagues, who was already on his second marriage at the tender age of 27, looked at it from another perspective. He said “If you put a bean into a jar for every time you make love to your partner before you get married, and then take a bean out of the jar for every time you have sex after you are married, you will never ever empty that jar.” For him it was all about sex. Listening to my twice-married mate complaining about his sex life drying up, was hard to fathom. I had never encountered this problem. He was like a starving man telling the local fatty what it was like to be hungry. Incomprehensible.

Yes, I agree sex *is* an important part of a relationship. We are basically animals and are hard-wired to have sex. I’ve obviously never been a woman (can you imagine? – with my face for radio), but I do believe that men tend to look at sex as a physical need. Without emotion it need be. Women, in my experience, prefer some emotional connection before they do the funky monkey. Or maybe I am just a relic. That is the opinion of someone who is a bit older than the millennials of today. Social media seems to have changed the way people regard sex.

I was shocked when I found out about ‘sexting’. Apparently, these days all you have to do is find someone online to swap pictures of genitalia with and if you both like what you see you go forth and hump. And then there’s Tinder. I’m not convinced that this is good news for the future. If courtship and getting to know someone is now obsolete, I can see a future where sex robots become the norm. After all, if you are having great, regular sex with a ‘partner’ that is always available, never drunk and does not judge, why would you need more. Sure, it might cause some problems when booking into a hotel. “Excuse me madam. I see you booked a single bed, but it appears that you need a room for two. That will be an extra \$50 please. Thank you

END OF PROLOGUE

Chapter One – Man down

Mack, who now lived in his hometown of Johannesburg, had agreed to be my best man. He came down to Durban and we stayed with my parents for a few days. Just to make sure that I covered all my bases, I had arranged three bachelor parties – one for my work colleagues, one for my friends and one for family. A couple of days before my wedding, I had the ‘tame’ family party. I never told them that I had three parties. The last two days before the wedding was just Mack and me. We had not seen each other for a couple of years so we mainly just hung out and drank lots of beer.

The night before my wedding we (stupidly) decided that we would see how far down the Golden Mile we could get, which used to be the ultimate drinking challenge in Durban. There were numerous pubs all along Durban’s beachfront which is only about a mile long. No need for driving. To this day I have no recollection of which pubs we went to. Not even a flashback.

The next day – the day of my wedding - I woke up feeling like a camel had dumped in my throat and Quasimodo was ringing bells in my throbbing head. I was in a bad way. And we were late. It was at least an hour to Jackie’s hometown, where our wedding venue was.

“Fuck!”

Grabbing a white shirt out of the dryer, and my new suit and shoes out of the wardrobe, I hurriedly started packing.

“Don’t forget a tie,” reminded Mack. I packed a tie.

“And go wash your face.”

“Ok boss, “I said sarcastically as I headed towards the bathroom.

“Damn!” Did I get a shock. Who was this guy in the mirror? My face looked like it had been lightly sand-papered. It was a dark pink with some red splotches.

“Maaack! Come here!”

He popped his grinning face through the doorway. “How much do you remember about last night.” He asked.

“Not much. The last thing I remember was being hungry,” I replied.

He laughed. “Yes, you wanted a burger and fries before we headed home.”

“Why is my face so red?”

“Well, you poured a whole bottle of tomato sauce onto your plate of food and then face-planted before you ate anything. Bulls-eye. I was tempted to let you sleep for a bit, but was afraid that you might drown, and I had no desire to give you mouth to mouth, so I pulled your face out of the food.”

“Well fuck me, George! Thanks man. Jackie would have been pissed.” I was relieved that it was not something serious. I gave my face a good scrub and declared to Mack that I was good to go.

I had left Mack in charge of all the arrangements, him being somewhat more responsible than I was. Besides, he was my best man, and, traditionally, it was his job to look after me until I was safely married, and hopefully not chained to a train seat and heading for Cape Town.

We hopped in the car, and we arrived at the hotel an hour before the wedding was due to start. I started to panic.

“Fuck Mack, I’m getting married today. Man down.”

“Listen. There’s no time for second thoughts. We have less than an hour to get to the church. Move your ass.” The calm voice of reason and practicality.

As I was heading into the shower, I barked some instructions.

“Ok, I’m going to take a quick shower and have a shave. Phone room service and order me 4 double vodkas and lemonade. And find someone to iron my shirt. Like, immediately! Thanks, bud.”

Emerging from the best shower that I had ever had, I was feeling a bit more positive. Mack had bribed a housekeeper to do ‘emergency ironing’ and I was glad that I had wrapped a towel around my waist, as she was using the kitchen counter to iron my shirt. On the coffee table were 4 glasses, which I presumed were the vodkas. Excellent. I downed the first drink and declared, “I’m having a hair of the dog that bit me.”

“Good idea,” Mack agreed. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, but Quasimodo is still ringing bells in my head. I wish someone would push him already.”

By now my shirt was crisply ironed and I downed the second vodka as the housekeeper closed the door behind her. I started dressing. The shirt was warm and wrapped me in a cocoon of calm, soothing my anxieties.

“We might just make it,” Mack surmised.

“I’m sure Jackie will eviscerate me if I am just one minute late,” I replied. “Do my tie please Mack.”

“Fuck off. Since when have you ever seen me wear a tie? You have NEVER seen me wear a tie. I know this because I haven’t worn one since high school. Leave the tie. We can do it at the church.”

“OK.”

Downing the remaining two vodkas, I gave myself one last check in the mirror. Satisfied, I declared myself ready for anything. We sped off to the church and arrived with one minute to spare. There was no sign of the bridal party. None of their cars were in the parking lot.

My anxiety surged. “Left at the altar. Fuck!”

Thankfully, Mack was not flustered. I loved that about him. Even in the army, he always maintained his composure and even keel.

“Come. Let’s just go and sit down in our pew and she will arrive shortly. I’m sure. Come.”

“Hang on a mo. Let me put my tie on quickly.”

The guests were all seated in the pews and waiting expectantly for the bride to appear. I smiled and waved at the ones I knew and pretended that all was good, but I was like a duck on a pond, appearing to glide gracefully along the water, while meanwhile, under the surface, my feet were frantically kicking.

“Fuck! What do I do now?” I asked myself. I felt like a complete twat. I wasn’t sure what I should do. I was too jumpy to sit down, despite the vodka buzz I was experiencing.

Mack had BIG hair. Dirty blonde wavy hair that he rarely combed, which resulted in him having what I like to call ‘a white fro’. Looking for distraction, I went behind him and tied his hair back with an elastic band I had been fidgeting with since we had gotten into the car. I quickly became the focal point of everyone’s attention. I could imagine that more than a few of them were thinking “Ahh. So that’s why the bride never pitched up. She found out that he is gay.”

No sooner had I completed the final twist of the elastic band around Mack’s new ponytail, when the ‘Wedding March’ began playing. I turned towards the arched doorway at the entrance to the church and saw my beautiful future ex-wife smiling radiantly. It was at that moment that I remembered her penchant for practical jokes. She had once faked a robbery at our house just to see how I would react. It was one of the reasons we got on so well. We both had a weird sense of humour. I was now certain that she had purposely arrived late, just to see how I would react. As planned, the ceremony was brief, and I managed to do all the right moves and say all the right things. It was good to get that out of the way. Phew!

The reception was to be held a short distance away, and we all made our way there. By the time all the guests had been assigned to their respective tables, and their glasses filled with champagne, I was feeling rather chuffed. My head had stopped throbbing (thanks to another two double vodkas) and felt rather relieved that I had not been made a fool of and been left standing at the altar - despite my anxiety about marriage.

Jaqueline had repeatedly told me that it was my duty as the groom to make a speech thanking her parents. What for, I was not quite sure. It wasn’t like we were still living in Victorian England, and I had to go ask permission from her father to get married. One of my favourite bumper stickers is “Don’t delay – procrastinate today!” That was exactly what I had done. There was no prepared speech.

Everyone who was supposed to give a speech was sitting on the stage at the main table. I’m sure there is a proper name for it, but I really have no clue. I had settled into a semi trance, blocking out everything around me – lost in my thoughts. If there had been a quiz about who

gave what speech, or what they said, I would have got zero. To this day, I couldn't tell you if there was a Master of Ceremonies or not. Alcohol will do that.

One of the best things about not being involved in the planning of the wedding is that I was just as surprised by the reception as anyone. Jacqueline had performed miracles with her limited budget. It was a huge wedding, with 180 guests. Her brother, a five-star hotel chef, had volunteered to do the catering as his wedding present to us. It was a feast fit for royalty. I did insist that I would oversee music however and had hired the best mobile DJ in Durban. After all, weddings should be about dancing and having a good time. I paid him until midnight with the provision that if the party was rocking, he would get paid by the hour thereafter.

A month prior to the wedding, I had sustained a serious eye injury and now wore a black pirate eyepatch. All I needed was a parrot on my shoulder and a Jack Sparrow hat, and I would have been able to audition for a role as a drunken pirate. I was halfway there. I had a patch – and I was drunk. Mack leaned over to snap me out of my reverie. “You're up,” he whispered.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” My mind took a couple of seconds to adjust, and then, like a true performer, I waffled my way through a speech I had not prepared.

“Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, friends, family, my in-laws, and of course Mack, my best man. I thank you all for joining us on this auspicious day, to celebrate the happy union of my beautiful wife, Jaqueline and yours truly. Looking around the hall, I must admit that I don't recognise most of you, but I'm sure you all know Jackie. Look at the wonderful job she has done. Amazing! Thank you, my darling. I love you (that was the alcohol talking). Planning a wedding this grand has given me a sore wrist, as I had many checks to write. When the checks ran out, I took my bank manger out for a pub lunch to persuade him to increase my overdraft. It worked – thankfully! He also confessed to me, after a few beers, that he had been married thirty years and that his wife was the best investment he had ever made. I stand here in the hope that I too, made a good investment by marrying Jackie, because now I am broke. I literally had nothing to do with the planning of this wedding, but I did pay for the drinks, so don't be shy. Enjoy the party! Thank you all for coming. Let us drink a toast to Jackie!”

And that was that. I was relieved. I had made it. I could relax now. All was good in the universe. But my future ex-wife was looking at me with daggers in her eyes. “Oh shit! I think I need another vodka.” And that was the beginning of the ‘Cold War’, a shift in our relationship. I did my best to avoid Jackie for the rest of the night, fearful that she would come down on me like a pile of bricks for not having thanked her parents.

There was no escaping the first dance though. Jackie had chosen ‘*The Blue Danube*’, by Johann Strauss, a song we had practiced once a week for a month, under the watchful eye of a nine-toed ex-dancer who had become a dance teacher after somehow cutting off her left big toe whilst mowing the lawn. I stayed on the dance floor after the waltz, gyrating alone to the sounds of DJ Inferno. Dancing does not come naturally to me, but I enjoy it, nevertheless. A work colleague had told me once, one boozy night in a club the staff frequented, that I should give it up.

“Why,” I asked quizzically.

“Mate – you look like two rhinos mating when you’re on the dance floor.”

It didn’t dampen my spirits, however. As Rennie Ellis famously once said: “Beer has long been the prime lubricant in our social intercourse...”

Jackie was doing the rounds, making small talk with all the guests, many of them friends and relatives of hers that she hadn’t seen in ages, so she was taking the opportunity to catch up. I found out later that it was something we were supposed to have done as a couple. Oops!

Shirley Bassey’s *Big Spender* started playing. The exhibitionist inside me, which tends to appear after some prime lubricant, took over. Slowly unbuttoning my shirt, I went into strip mode, strutting, rhino-like across the emptying dance floor. This was the groom putting on a show. The circle of guests around the edge of the dance floor were now shouting encouragement as I went ahead with my solo cabaret. I struggled a bit with my cufflinks, but I finally managed, and proceeded to swing my shirt above my head, like I had seen in so many movies. I was enjoying being the centre of attention and the crowd was now clapping and cheering, egging me to go further. I obliged. I threw my shirt onto the dance floor and undid my belt. My belt was stuck. Oh dear!

Living with Jackie was fattening. She was a superb cook, and I normally had seconds of every dish she made. But the show must go on. I gave it a good yank and it somehow came loose. I was having a great time! Before I could wave it above my head and throw it to the floor, a party-pooper in the form of my future ex-wife appeared. Poof! Just like that! She grabbed my arm firmly and, with a very false smile plastered across her face, and fury in her eyes, she manoeuvred me off the dance floor.

The Cold War had set in properly now. Little did I know that, in a couple of days’ time, it would escalate to ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’ level. I got dressed and tried to sober up. The party was rocking. DJ Inferno, after receiving his hourly check, played on till 2am. By then, the crowd had thinned, so we decided to wrap it up. Our hotel was 10km down the road. Jackie drove. I wasn’t going to argue. I knew I was in no state to drive. Besides, I had my eye patch on, and was not comfortable driving at night anyway. And she was a better driver. Our first night together as a married couple was not the stuff of romance novels. The mood was tense and, to make matters worse, a sewerage pipe had burst just outside our room. It had been a long day. At least one of us had enjoyed it.

Being in the hospitality industry had its perks. I worked for what was the largest hotel group in Southern Africa at the time, so was entitled to good discounts if I stayed at any of the hotels in our chain. Most of them were 4 or 5-star hotels, which were quite luxurious, so would normally be out of my price range. Planning road trips was a bit trickier before the days of the *World Wide Web*. Facsimile (fax) machines were the preferred method of communication when doing business. But even before you got that far, you would need to page through the phonebook to find the necessary phone numbers needed, then phone each hotel separately (no central reservations at that stage) and state your request. When the switchboard did eventually put you through to reservations, you had to explain all the details – how many pax, duration, dates, etc.

“Ok sir. We will check availability and get back to you.”

Then you had to make sure that if you had a combination phone/fax machine, that you had it set on phone and not fax, so that they could get hold of you. Those of you who of that era will remember the frustration of getting the whiny fax sound when trying to get hold of someone. Once the hotel reservationist had got back to you and confirmed availability, you then had to switch back to fax mode in order to receive confirmation by fax. And God forbid that your ink cartridge has run out! It took patience and perseverance.

Jackie, being a teacher, had planned the wedding to coincide with the winter school holidays, and I had enough leave owing to me, so we were able to plan a 10-day honeymoon. Jackie had, by now, transferred to another school, which, although still quite a distance away, was much closer than before. I had recently purchased a second-hand Peugeot for her use.

The common problem with a lot of imported European cars in those days was that the thermostats were designed for a colder climate, not the cruel African climate. This led to overheating issues, especially with French and German cars. We had had a few issues with the radiator before, and Jackie, who loved to make lists (it's a teacher thing), had given me a HONEYMOON CHECKLIST- which clearly stated in pole position:

1. FIX RADIATOR. I hadn't. Oops!

I was reluctant to spend our 'honeymoon money' on what I thought was an unnecessary expense.

The cost of the wedding and honeymoon had seriously dented my overdraft. And, even if Jackie turned out to be a 'good investment', I doubted I could cash her in for real money. We spent the morning after our wedding packing and saying goodbye to her family, then headed to my parents' place in Durban. It had been decided that this would not only give me a chance to say farewell to my parents but also allow us to spend less time on the road the following day - DAY ONE of the long-awaited honeymoon. Things were still strained between us, and I suspected that Jackie was having regrets about asking (commanding) me to marry her. Apparently, many years ago, it was traditional for the Scandinavians to drink mead (fermented honey) during the first month of marriage to improve the likelihood of conception, hence the term 'honeymoon'. Sounded like a great excuse to get drunk and have sex, but, after the wedding night, I was hesitant to do both.

We were up early, to avoid traffic, and embarked on the first leg of our honeymoon. When you head slightly west of north when leaving Durban, you will find yourself in the Drakensberg mountains, part of the Great Escarpment which encloses the central southern African plateau, with the highest point sitting at 3482 metres above sea level. The lower part of the range was situated between Johannesburg and Durban.

It is a very popular destination for weekend getaways and littered with lovely resorts. One of these resorts, was a luxurious 4-star property near Winterton, a relatively new addition to the Sun International portfolio of properties. As it was only 3 years old, I had not yet had the chance to visit it, but I knew that Jackie would love it.

I had intentionally planned a short drive for our first day, as I wanted to 'ease into' the honeymoon and not spend most of the time driving. It turned out to be the correct decision. Jackie was delighted with its luxuriousness, and we had time to go for a scenic hike through a fern forest nearby before supper. That evening, we enjoyed drinks around the bar's fireplace, laughing and chatting with new friends we had met whilst hiking. It gets chilly in the mountains during winter, so we spent the night spooning to keep warm. My mood was more buoyant as I ate breakfast the next morning. The weather might have been cold, but there was a definite thaw in the Cold War. DAY ONE. Success. Tick ✓

Chapter Two – Blowing Off Steam

Day two required a much longer drive, and we did not leave as early as planned. Nevertheless, I was confident that we could make it before nightfall. My eyepatch made me reluctant to drive at night. It was still difficult for me to judge distances, and, while it was not a major issue during the day, darkness exacerbated the problem. It was especially dangerous on narrow roads – the headlights of oncoming cars making me swerve too far to the left, as I overcompensated in an effort to avoid a collision.

We got onto the N3, still able to see the majestic mountains on our left, with their snow-capped peaks poking into the crisp, blue winter sky. I was playing my favourite tape, and Tracy Chapman was singing *Fast Car*. Jackie had reclined her seat all the way back and was looking relaxed and content. I smiled. “It’s gonna be alright.” It was short-lived optimism. The N3 heads uphill towards Johannesburg – a 550km stretch - and we had to go almost halfway along it before we turned off the main road. I had travelled less than 50km, and was busy climbing a steep hill, when steam started erupting from the bonnet. “Oh no! Not now, “I pleaded with whatever deity was responsible. I nervously glanced at Jackie to see if she had noticed. She had. “Did you have the radiator fixed,” she asked sternly, knowing full well that I hadn’t.

“No,” I replied meekly.

“I knew this was going to happen! You NEVER listen to me!”

No reply from me.

“What are we going to do now? We’ll never make it to Swaziland by dark!”

I looked down the road and saw a sign. LADYSMITH 10KM.

I pulled the car over onto the shoulder and retrieved the two COKE bottles, I had the foresight to fill with water, from my seat. Bonnet lifted, I poured one bottle of water over the violently hissing radiator, in a feeble attempt to cool it down. Grabbing a rag from my tool bag, I gingerly opened the radiator cap, careful not to scald myself. Opening the second bottle, I topped up with water and said “That will get us to Ladysmith.”

“It had better!” was the retort.

Ladysmith is not the biggest town on earth. It sits on the Klip (Stone) River and is situated at the bottom of the hazardous Van Reenen’s Pass, which steeply winds up to the escarpment proper. I was glad we were not going that route. Slowly, I drove into town, cruising down the main street praying (figuratively speaking) that I would find a suitable place that could extricate me from my dire situation. A mechanic perhaps.

My grandmother tried her best to make a good Catholic out of me, but I was too intelligent to find the logic behind believing in something I couldn’t prove. Besides, deities seemed to have a warped idea about good and bad. If your family is trapped in the house and all perish

painfully in the fire, some nut will inevitably come and say ‘GOD works in mysterious ways.’
FUCK OFF! How, in any way, shape or form is that part of a deity’s plan? Surely, if a god is supposed to symbolise good, how can you justify all the horrible things that happen?

Ricky Gervais summed it up nicely in one of his shows. An insurance salesman is on the phone to GOD asking if he must pay Mr. Jones out to repair the damage caused by a tree falling on it. GOD quickly leafs through his diary and said, somewhat surprised “No, actually. It wasn’t an ACT OF GOD. I was in Africa that day, giving AIDS to babies.”

The reason I was thinking these thoughts was because I had just spotted a sign saying: SILVERTON RADIATORS. Yes, I was very relieved to see the sign, but then I’m thinking “Hang on a minute. Why the fuck did HE cause my radiator to blow up if HE was going to lead me to a radiator repair shop ten minutes down the road. The Afrikaans have a word for it – ‘rondfok’. It’s as if HE is just sitting up there like a bored cat, looking for something or someone to fuck with. WTF!

Pulling into the radiator shop, I was still a bit concerned that they might not have a Peugeot radiator, but a weight lifted off my shoulders when the owner informed me that he did, indeed, have one.

“It’ll take about two hours though.”

Jackie was fuming. I felt foolish and embarrassed that I had not taken care of number one – FIX THE RADIATOR! Once again, I had fallen from grace (keeping with the religious theme).

“Give me R100” she demanded.

“What for?”

“I’m going to have my hair done.”

“You had your hair done three days ago.”

“I’m not waiting here for two hours staring at the mechanic fixing the radiator. There’s a hairdresser across the road. Come and fetch me when you’re done.”

Her icy tone and fierce eyes prevented me from any further argument, so I handed her the cash and watched dejectedly as she trotted across the road.

Finally, almost three hours later, the job was done. I went to call her. She was sitting with a cup of coffee in her hand chatting merrily to the hairdresser, her new perm all bouncy curls. Hairdressers always seem to soothe women. Personally, (and I talk from experience) I think the main reason they go to hairdressers is to let off steam (no pun intended), which mainly consists of complaining about their partner or husband. In a way, like how some men hire prostitutes to talk to (so I have heard). The difference is that a hairdresser will not give you sympathy sex afterwards. That was fine with me. If she had somehow managed to get it all off her (rather ample) chest and calm down a trifle, then it got my stamp of approval. I thought her new perm looked exactly like her previous one, but at this precarious stage of our marriage, I was not going to tell her that. The détente was over, and we were back to COLD WAR - LEVEL ONE status.

The next hotel I had booked was The Royal Swazi Sun, in Mbabane, the capital of what was then Swaziland – now called Eswatini. It just so happens to be the last absolute monarchy in Africa and is currently ruled by King Mswati the Third. There were no highways connecting Ladysmith to Mbabane, just a spider web of pretty shitty rural roads – all of them taking a zig-zag approach to Mbabane, which is still 400km from Ladysmith and it was now 2pm. One thing I DID always keep in my car was maps. I had a road map for every one of the four provinces, and one huge national road map.

It was not on Jackie's list, but I *had* taken the time to study the route and had figured out the shortest route. Still, it was 400km. There was absolutely NO chance of reaching Mbabane by nightfall. We headed off towards Paulpietersburg. We would cross the border at Mahamba. Upon reaching Vryheid, I started to relax a little. The radiator seemed to be working properly, but there was lingering dread deep down. It was going to be a long afternoon. Jackie seemed reasonably content, once again almost horizontal in the passenger seat, listening to *Pretty Woman*. And she did look pretty. I thought about how lucky I was to have her in my life. Yes, she scared me sometimes, but she was more than I deserved.

I increased the pace slightly, wanting to get through this leg of the trip as quickly as possible - yet safely. By 5pm, we were still 150km from our destination, and, being winter, already almost dark. I now found myself in a quandary. Do I continue to drive and risk an accident? – or do I ask her to drive? I knew that Jackie did not *want* to drive, but I also knew that she would do the responsible thing, despite her feelings. I guess, in a way, I am a romantic. I *did* believe that it was a man's responsibility to do everything in his power to ensure that his beloved wife enjoyed her honeymoon. Happy wife – happy life. I felt it was a bit unfair that I ask her to drive, especially since she looked so relaxed and seemed to be enjoying the music, singing "Gonna meet all my friends, gonna have ourselves a ball..." I didn't debate for too long though. I was more afraid of having an accident than I was of Jackie.

"I don't think it wise of me to drive any further,' I stated as calmly as I could. "Could you please drive the rest of the way? Normally, I would have ended that request with a 'dear' – or a 'beloved', but, as they say, timing is everything.

"I guess I have no choice," she replied frostily.

Jackie was an excellent driver, certainly better than I was. Ok, let me rephrase that. She was a careful and responsible driver. A safe driver. My driving was more suited to driving a getaway car. She never broke any laws and always kept both hands on the steering wheel. But driving at night was something she hated just as much as I did and did not generally drive at night, unless she absolutely positively had to. She had epicanthal folds in the corners of both eyes. We were both so young, yet both so fucked.

It was the correct decision though. The lesser of two evils. How does one decide which is the lesser of two evils? It sort of implies that you have to have already experienced both types of evil before you can make an informed decision. That would require us to both crash the car and then decide whose crash was the worst. Or best – depending on how you looked at it.

When I think back to the 2016 presidential elections in the US, when Hilary Clinton ran against Donald Trump, I wonder if Hilary would have been a better president. We now have the hindsight of knowing what a narcissistic liar Trump is, but we will never know just how bad Hilary would have been. That is probably a good thing.

Just before 7pm, we started ascending down the mountain pass which led to the hotel in the valley below. The dry winter grass on both sides of the road was on fire, most likely a result of controlled burning, or maybe a careless match being tossed. Either way, our car was engulfed in smoke, limiting our visibility to less than three metres. Jackie crawled to a snail's pace, which was the responsible thing to do. We were almost there. No point in going off the road and hurtling through the air, erupting in a ball of flames as our car exploded on impact in the valley 500 metres below. Patience is a virtue.

Upon arrival, a little before 8pm, I drove up to the front entrance and hurried into the reception leaving Jackie to organise a bellhop to unload our luggage. I was still busy checking in when Jackie arrived with the bellhop and a trolley full of luggage. I handed her the key and she went up to the room while I finished filling in the paperwork. She seemed grumpy. "Oh dear."

I was relieved to have arrived alive, but I suspected it was going to be a stormy night. I opened the room door a few minutes later, only to see a very annoyed wife. The bellhop, having neatly stowed our suitcases on the luggage rack, was standing expectantly to one side. I slipped him a tip and he departed, leaving me to face whatever storm that was about to come. She reminded me of a graphic poster I had once seen of THE GODDESS OF THUNDER. Ominous.

'Come look here,' she said in a mockingly sweet voice.

I was waiting to be struck by lightning." What's wrong?" I asked in a concerned tone, a little bit frightened to know what was about to happen.

She drew back the curtains. Our allocated room was strangely not aligned to the adjacent 3-storey undercover parking lot. At waist level, there was the edge of a one-foot slab of concrete which formed the roof of the 3rd floor of the undercover section of the parking lot. If you looked beneath it, you peered down on the roofs of the cars parked there. I looked above the slab. I was eye to eye with the hubcap of a black Mercedes Benz, which was parked on the rooftop parking, exposed to the elements.

"Fuck."

The panic was rising again. I tried to take charge of the situation. "I'm sure it's just a simple mistake. It's definitely NOT the room I asked for. I'll go down and sort it out."

Without saying a word, she stormed past me and got into the elevator, which was still on our floor.

Slow to react, the elevator doors closed before I had a chance to join her. I saw a sign nearby. FIRE ESCAPE. I ran as fast as I could down the stairs and emerged in the lobby. Too late!

Jackie had already reached the front desk and was animatedly talking to a tall, good-looking man in a fancy black suit. As she ranted and gestured with her hands, he calmly came around the front desk and placed a hand on her shoulder, in a placating manner. Being in the hospitality industry myself, I knew what type of people became 5-star hotel managers. They exuded charm, looked like movie stars and were very diplomatic. It was magical to watch. She stopped moving, and a vision of a deer caught in the headlights of a car ran through my brain.

He was giving her his best Dean Martin smile. Unhappy guests were bad for business. In a way it was comical, seeing this giant of a man soothing this 5ft tall woman as if she were a sobbing child. I was most impressed, so I kept my distance. And then a miracle happened, right before my eyes. She smiled. It felt safe to approach now, which I did. As I slowly made my way across the lobby from my 'safe space', the manager summonsed one of the desk receptionists, who immediately hurried to his master's side.

I introduced myself as the HUSBAND ((a touch jealous perhaps), but before I could say anything else, Jackie interjected.

"This kind gentleman is giving us free supper and a show," she blurted out, excitedly.

"Yes, and I have arranged for you to move into the Honeymoon Suite," he said quickly.

I was certain that I *had* booked the honeymoon suite, but I said nothing. "This is not the time to start an argument," I decided wisely.

Jackie was extremely pleased with new suite. It *was* definitely a superb space, with its own lounge area and kitchenette, complete with a panoramic view of the valley, although I only found that out in the morning.

Time was fleeting and Jackie was eager to get to the show, so we had a quick shower (together – which was promising) and we started getting ready. Of course, being a man, it only took me 5 minutes to get dressed. I quickly went down to reception and enquired about my booking, knowing I had at least 15 minutes before Jackie would be ready. I explained that I had received a confirmation by fax, and they did manage to find the confirmation they had faxed me, and they apologised. It was comforting knowing that it wasn't my fault after all. I wasn't a complete idiot. Incomplete, maybe.

I don't think she even knew that I had left the room. When I returned, she was busy fluffing her new perm in the bathroom mirror. I rolled my eyes and said nothing. I also had no intention of telling her that I was not at fault regarding the mix up with the rooms. One day, I promised myself, but not today. A thaw in the Cold War seemed imminent, and I longed for détente.

The show had just begun as we arrived at the supper theatre. Our table was front and centre – the best spot. We had been assigned, not one, but THREE waiters to our table and had given us carte blanche. "Anything you desire. Just order it. Anything at all. On the house. Enjoy your evening."

Somehow, I was grateful to whomever made the booking error. Here we were, being treated like royalty at the best hotel in Swaziland and enjoying a highly rated show. I would certainly

never have been able to afford such opulence. Funny how things work out. I was now back in Jackie's good books and the Cold War was over – at least for now. "What else could possibly happen?" I thought. Hah!

We feasted on lobster, steak, and many other delicious dishes that we could hardly pronounce and washed it all down with REAL champagne. I felt like a king. It must have cost a fortune. This seemed like a better way for deities to be 'mysterious'. This was the sort of practical joke I could handle. It was like your father telling you that he never bought you a Christmas present, but meanwhile had stashed your new bicycle in the garage. You got upset for a short while, but when you were presented with the bicycle, you forgot all about your brief grumpiness and were ecstatic. No need to go killing babies and call it 'mysterious'. But I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole, yet.

I had somehow dodged a bullet and I was grateful for that.

The show was amazing. There were a lot of half-naked dancers, both male and female, in glittering costumes which they changed after each song – all of them familiar old songs such as *Dancing in the Rain* and *New York, New York*. We were both ready for bed by the time it ended, but as we were only staying for one night (or so I thought) I persuaded Jackie to come with me to the casino – not to gamble, just to have a look. I love casinos. There is an air of expectation. Punters, filled with hope, excitedly place their bets believing that they are only one spin or card away from riches. Even the losers believe.

"My losses are temporary. The wheel will turn." The gamblers mantra.

The (almost) unexpected expense of the new radiator had forced me to lower my daily budget, so I refrained from having a punt, although the temptation was there. Jackie was not a gambler and that was the first time she had ever been to a casino. We did a quick circuit of the casino floor and went to our room, and were fast asleep, spooning, by 11.30pm.

DAY TWO complete. Tick. ✓

Chapter Three – Pitching Tent

The last stop on our itinerary was the famous Sun City Resort in Bophuthatswana, one of the so-called 'independent homelands' that the apartheid government had established but which were not recognised by any other country except South Africa. It was about two hours north of Johannesburg. I had planned our itinerary so that we would slowly make our way to Sun City, only driving for a few hours each day, allowing us more time to enjoy ourselves.

After sleeping in, we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and headed off on the third leg of the trip, which was a motel in a tiny little village called Bambi. We were booked in at Bambi Motel for one night. There was literally nothing to do anywhere near Bambi, but it was the correct distance from Swaziland and, from the photos I had seen in the motel brochure, was a popular stop, mainly because it was an historical building from the nineteenth century. A sort of rustic, rural retreat. Jackie was into antiques, and I thought she would enjoy the old historical building with its accompanying antique furniture.

I doubted that anybody I knew had ever heard of Bambi (the town – not the deer). The shortest route was 190km long, via the R541, but I decided to go north towards the famous Kruger National Park, and then get onto the N4 highway, and exit onto the R539 – an added distance of about 65km. I estimated it was only an extra 45 minutes of driving, at the most.

Jackie, who had been unapproachable sexually since our marriage, seemed to be warming. She had slept well and was feeling refreshed, and had a belly full of bacon, fried eggs and boerewors (plus two cups of her favourite drink – coffee). She was now lying in her usual reclined position listening to *It Must Have Been Love*, by *Roxette*, the fingers of her right hand gently stroking my neck. *Pretty Woman* had recently become her all-time favourite movie since we had watched it two weeks previously. She was playing the soundtrack tape.

I saw a sign up ahead – PIGGS PEAK HOTEL AND CASINO. We had been driving for less than an hour, but I had heard about this place from a colleague and wanted to pop in and have a peek.

"I would like to have a look at PIGGS PEAK HOTEL. Is that OK?"

"Ok."

I pulled into the parking lot. The lobby was deserted. No sign of anyone. And then, quick as a flash, a young female, all smartly dressed in blazer and slacks, appeared from nowhere.

"Good morning. How may I help you?"

"Morning. Is the casino open?"

"No, sir. But it will be in 10 minutes."

I looked at Jackie. She shrugged. That was a good sign.

"Where is the casino?"

“Behind you on the left. Just go through that door over there sir. I’m afraid only the slot machines will be opening though. The tables only open at 6pm.”

“That’s fine. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

We found the slot area and had a look around. It wasn’t a very big area – certainly nowhere near as big as the other mainstream casinos. But we were out in the sticks, and this seemed the right size considering the location. A lady from housekeeping was busy wiping down the machines. I noticed that they were the old classic one-armed-bandit type, with a long handle topped with a black knob. To me, those were the best.

I had always wondered what would happen if I played every slot machine in a casino on my own. Slot machines were usually programmed to pay out a certain percentage of the takings. In other words, if a machine was programmed to pay out at 94%, it meant that for every 100 cents in takings it would pay out an average of 94 cents. To keep you, interested, it would intermittently pay out a handful of coins for certain combinations of the pictures on the reels. The big jackpots only paid out once the machine had taken in enough money to cover the jackpot – ensuring that the casino never lost. Theoretically, if I put R100 into all the machines I would get back R94, but that was misleading, because averages needed thousands of spins to be accurate. And you never knew if any of the machines was primed to pay out a big jackpot.

In my youth, and when I say that I mean 11 and 12 years old, I had, on two occasions, hit the jackpot. In the mid 70s, our family enjoyed a lovely summer vacation on the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius. My brother and I were left largely to our own devices, while our parents socialised with the many other South Africans staying along the Grand Baie beachfront. As we were staying in a beach cottage, we spend our days snorkelling and playing on the beach. The hotel and casino were a few minutes down the beach, and it was normal for kids to be running around, playing. No forbidden areas – except the bar. Island style.

My father had given me some money to buy sweets, but I had not spent it yet. He was drinking in the hotel bar, and my brother and I were just playing with the other kids inside the hotel building. There is only so much time you can spend baking in the sun. Kids get bored after a while, and I was inspecting the 20 or so slot machines that were in the hotel lobby. I had never seen one before. I was curious. I only had three coins.

What happened next could never happen in this day and age. I inserted the coins and pulled the handle. The reels started whirring. Plop – one orange. Plop – another orange. Plop – a third orange. The machine started going mad, furiously spitting coins into the tray below, while loud bells began to ring. JACKPOT!

Of course, I was not of legal age, but I did not know what gambling was and that there was such a thing as an age limit. All I knew was that more money than I had ever seen in my life was now spilling out of the tray and onto the carpet. Guests flocked to see what the commotion was. I was still standing in front of the machine, frozen – thinking of all the toys I could buy. One of the managers appeared.

“Do you know that I can’t pay you out?”

“Why?” I asked, my dreams crushed.

“You are not allowed to gamble under 18.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed.

“But listen, if you can get one of your parents here before the big manager arrives, he can claim the money for you.”

My eyes went wide. A smile lit my face. I raced to the bar, only 15 metres away, and entered the forbidden zone. My father saw me instantly and was very shocked to see me. His face changed from shock to concern, which I guess is natural for a parent, probably fearing that been an accident and that this could be the only reason I would dare to enter the bar. He put his glass down and hurried towards me.

“Dad! Dad! Come quickly!”

That certainly didn’t help with his panic mode. Now he was really frightened.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him along. “I need you. I just won the jackpot.”

Instant relief. We were almost at the machine, where, by now, at least 20 people had gathered. The fountain of coins was still gushing. Strange how the sight of money can change one’s mood. My father was happier than I had ever seen him. Normally, a serious fellow, he was now grinning like a Cheshire cat. The slots attendant had arrived and was still trying to figure out who the winner was.

“That was me,” my father claimed. “It’s mine.”

“Well done, sir” he smiled.

My father shooed me away while he spoke to the attendant. I went home.

A few hours later - he had been celebrating in the bar – he arrived at our beach cottage, slightly sozzled, but in a very good mood.

“How much did I win?” I asked excitedly.

“I’m not telling you, but it was enough to pay for the whole holiday.”

“What do I get?”

“You’ll see,” he smiled.

The next day was New Year’s Eve – 31st December (Old Year’s Eve in some countries).

“Get in the car,” he said to my brother and me. We obeyed. We drove out of the touristy area we were staying in and into a neighbourhood where only locals lived. He parked outside a small shack of a shop. I could see a faded sign that was written in gibberish (I later discovered it was Chinese).

“Come,” he said to us, and we followed him inside.

It was the magic kingdom! The whole shop was filled with shelf upon shelf of fireworks – every young boy’s favourite. In those days, back in Durban, it was traditional to go down to the beachfront on Guy Fawkes Day (5th November) and let off as many different types of fireworks as possible. It also just happened to be my father’s birthday, so it was a big night for us all.

I stared in disbelief as my father stacked box after box of fireworks into the boot of the car. It was completely full. If I had been older, I would have cum in my pants. It was the best New Year’s Eve fireworks display ever!

The following year, while we were on holiday in Maseru, Lesotho, the exact same thing happened. I won the jackpot again. So, by 12, I was hooked on slot machines.

And now here I was, a dream come true – a whole casino to myself. There were exactly 50 slot machines in the room. Perfect. Just the right amount to do my little experiment. I went to the cashier’s desk and changed R25, receiving fifty 50-cent coins. Jackie and I started at opposite ends and fed a coin into each machine. Then we went back in the other direction and pulled each lever.

“Click, click, click, click...” as we pulled on the big black knobs, then suddenly letting go and watching the reels start to spin furiously, then slow - from left to right – as they settled into place. Only the middle row counted if you played one coin, but, still, we had managed to get three of the same fruit in the middle row on six of the machines, which set the bells ringing. A Pavlovian experience. The bells ring – and you get excited. We waited until all the machines were silent. Jackie, who seemed to be getting into the swing of things, grabbed a plastic tub from the cashier’s desk and eagerly started scooping coins into it. We sat down to count.

R5, R10, R15, R20, R25.

Exactly R25. On the nose! I considered breaking even a good result, although a jackpot certainly would have come in very handy. Anyway, tick that off the bucket list Tick. ✓

I always wonder why gambling is so addictive. Yes – we are basically just animals, and have basic instincts, but I’m not sure how gambling can fit into the same category as food, sex, security (and dancing). Yet, watching people in casinos is eye opening.

I am a lover of animals, especially cats, and I have observed how previously affectionate, docile cats get once they have to compete for food, especially if it is a raw fish. They become feral very quickly, clawing and kicking and biting, just to get that piece of dead fish. Humans are the same in casinos. There is a switch somewhere in the human brain that flips into feral mode when caught up in the frenzy of a busy casino. It is probably related to crowd hysteria. It doesn’t happen in a quiet casino – only when casinos are crowded.

Just earlier that year, I had been in our hotel casino when a punter sitting at the blackjack table had died of a heart attack and keeled over backwards. Dead. Being a busy weekend, the casino was packed, with two rows of punters waiting behind every blackjack table. Not one of the waiting players made a move to help the poor guy. There was a mad rush as 15 people pushed and shoved to get onto the now vacant box, some of them accidentally stepping on

the corpse. It was as if nothing had happened. Amazing. And scary. Us humans are capable of horrible things under certain conditions. The human psyche is very fragile and prone to manipulation.

I cashed in the coins and got my R25 back. I was relieved not to have lost the money. More importantly though, Jackie was happy. We hopped in the car and continued on our merry way. And merry it certainly proved to be. She seemed to have forgiven me for my 'sins', placing a warm hand on my thigh as I drove, which made me smile – *Can't Touch This* was playing on the car radio.

Swaziland is a small country and was considered by many South Africans to be just another province. It is quite geographically diverse for its size, with topography ranging from a cool, mountainous highveld, to a hot and dry lowveld. The Swazis were originally known as the Ngunwane, and were displaced from their former land, near what is now known as greater Maputo, to the region that was now known as The Kingdom of Swaziland. They had never been formally colonised, although they were at one time a British territory. In 1881, the British signed a convention recognising Swazi independence. This was also later recognised by the London Convention in 1884. It gained full independence in 1968.

Because of it being a largely agricultural country, it had a lot of sugar cane, forestry and citrus trees, which made driving through most areas very scenic. It was a popular 'drive-through' destination for South Africans either on their way to the Kruger National Park or returning from it - the other route options were pretty dull by comparison.

We were now driving along the MR1, on our way to Barberton, famous in rugby circles for having the tallest rugby posts in the world at that time. It was only 75km to Barberton, along a pleasant, verdant country road, that gently winds down to the lowveld. It was perfect for a leisurely drive and a tonic for our strained relationship.

I turned onto the R40. Despite the altitude, it was hot. Jackie had lifted her skirt onto her belly and was busy tanning her legs. She was in good shape, due to her hobbies of swimming, cycling and aerobics, and had well-toned legs. Her new frilly, white-laced panties contrasted teasingly with her olive-skinned thighs. Hot stuff! She saw me repeatedly glancing at her and said "Keep your eyes on the road." But she was grinning. She was in flirt mode. Once again, she had her hand on my thigh – one finger lazily stroking my thigh.

"What's that bulge in your pants? Are you pitching a tent?"

This was a phrase she had taught me back in our courtship days when she used to tease me constantly.

I turned to her and smiled. "Yes, it's a two-man tent. You can come anytime."

She laughed. Now my mind was stuck on sex. "Oh, the things I'm gonna do to you tonight," I thought.

Somehow managing not to crash, we reached Barberton, and decided to stop for lunch. The eastern region of South Africa is a web of small towns and narrow roads. It is predominantly an agricultural region, with some mining as well. Barberton had both, so, although not a big town by any stretch of the imagination, it was the biggest town in the greater district. We were now in Afrikaner territory.

It was not the sort of town where you would find a McDonalds, so, when we saw a sign promoting VETKOEK, we stopped. VETKOEK translates to FAT CAKE – curry mince, rolled in dough balls and deep-fried in oil. Very tasty, but oh so fattening. Also, very Afrikaans. After vetkoek and beer, we headed off once again, turning off onto the R38 which leads to Nelspruit, now Mbombela (Swazi for - ‘a lot of people in a small space’). We were enjoying the slow drive, listening to DJ Jackie’s greatest hits and engaging in flirtatious banter.

The Nelspruit area, because of its extremely fertile soil, produces some of the biggest fruit in the world. Most of it is exported so that the farmers can get paid in USD, GBP and Euros instead of the weak South African Rand. But not all of it. All roads leading into the city were always lined with hundreds of fruit and veggie vendors. Competition is fierce, so prices are low. The sort of bargains you can’t resist, so you end up buying much more than necessary. We had to stop. Bananas are my thing. I can eat them all day and Jackie loves her vitamin C, so we got a box of bananas and a box of oranges, putting them on the back seat due to lack of space. Impulse buying. We really only needed a few road snacks (padkos) as we were going to be taking most of our meals in hotels.

There are two routes leading from Nelspruit to Bambi – one via Alkmaar, and a slightly longer one via Brondal. Reckoning that I had time enough to easily reach Bambi by nightfall, I chose the scenic route, the road less travelled. It was in poor shape, with numerous potholes, and some sections had been eroded by the annual floods that occurred here, reducing the road to one lane in some parts. To her credit, Jackie never said a word. She was giving me tacit approval to take charge.

Unlike a lot of people I know, I love road trips. Driving in the city sucks, but being out on the open road, no matter how derelict it might be, was what made me tick. Travel was in my blood. It was about the journey, not the destination. We were now at the other end of the Drakensberg Range, near the Crossroads Pass, driving through alternate patches of grassland and timber plantations. There were quite a few mountain passes along this stretch. I was thankful that we now had a new radiator, as the gradients were challenging.

“Rather on day one than now, I thought,” as I engaged third gear, willing the poor little Peugeot up the never-ending incline. There would be a lot more passes to traverse in the coming days, as the itinerary took us on a mountainous circuit via Lydenburg, Pilgrim’s Rest, Sabie and White River, before heading off to our final destination – Sun City.

The road was deserted, as if some giant, cosmic vacuum cleaner had sucked the landscape clean of any signs of life. I could see no dwellings. The only structures to be seen were the odd windmill and the wooden telephone poles lining the road. Spooky. A couple of cars did eventually speed past me, going in the opposite direction, which reassured me that I was not the last man on earth. Jackie had turned the radio off and was now curled up in a ball on her

reclined seat, having a nap, looking like a fallen angel. It was eerily quiet. The lack of music changed the atmosphere, and I began to think about various sci-fi movies I had seen. Nearly all of them involved an apocalyptic earth.

“Well, if I am about to die, I’ll guess I will die happy,” I thought to myself, smiling. “I have a lovely wife, a good job, and a bunch of good friends. I’ll die as happy as a pig in shit.” I glanced at my watch. It was 4.30pm already!

“Strange. I must have been daydreaming. We should have been there by now.” I was tempted to pull over and consult the map, but decided to press on just a little further, not wanting to wake Jackie. Nope. There was nothing to indicate where I was. Nada. Now I was getting a tad concerned. I pulled over onto the shoulder, waking Jackie in the process.

“Are we there yet?” she asked wearily.

“No,” I replied, reaching for the map in the cubbyhole.

“Where are we?”

“I’m not sure. I just want to check something,” I said in a monotone, not wanting to start an argument. I focused all of my attention on the map, willing it to tell me where I was.

“You said at lunch time that it was only two hours away.”

Without replying, I got out of the car, and strained my eye in the fading light, desperately trying to see some sort of landmark, or a sign, Anything! And not a soul to be seen. “I’m royally fucked now!” I admitted to myself.

The sun had already gone into hiding behind the mountains, and we were only a few minutes away from darkness. I had no clue. I got back in and turned to her, not liking the scowl that greeted me.

“What do you suggest? I think I might have missed a turn-off somewhere. I’m not sure.”

“Don’t ask me! I was sleeping!”

Switching the overhead light on, I once again consulted the map. It seemed like the only possible place I could have gone wrong is by missing the left turn to Dollaaskraal. I must have missed the sign while my head was in space.

“Look here. We need to be on the R539,” I said, pointing to the map.

She leant over to have a look.

“I probably missed the turn-off and just carried on straight, towards Hendrikdal.”

“That looks like the only possibility,” she agreed. At least she was being agreeable.

“Here’s what I’m thinking. If we *are* near Hendrikdal, that puts us about 65km from Bambi. If we continue on this looping road, and go through the Makobulaan Nature Reserve, it is more or less the same distance. We could turn around – or just press on. It seems that all roads lead to Bambi.”

She gave me the dreaded 'teacher stare', which could stop a charging elephant, and looked silently at me for a moment, obviously weighing up whether she was going to go all out ballistic on me, or not. In the end she said nothing. There was no need for words – I could read the sub text: "If you fuck up again on this trip, you might never get laid again."

I drove off once again, passing through Hendrikdal fifteen minutes later and finding the turn-off to the nature reserve. Ten minutes later, the road disappeared. Well, not the road per se, but the tarmac. Just like that. One second, I was driving on a flat top, and the next I was driving on red sand. I stopped the car. A thick pine forest was all around us, and tall trees blocked the little moonlight there had been, making the darkness darker still. It was like being in a nightmare - surrounded by hungry shadowy monsters just waiting to feast upon any lost souls. "Canned humans, anyone?"

It was already 7pm and we hadn't seen a car for almost two hours. The map had a clearly marked road that ran through the nature reserve, but it didn't specify whether it was tarred or not. Jackie was trying her best not to explode. She was most likely thinking "I can't believe I asked this loser to be my husband. What on earth was I thinking?"

"Now what?" she asked in disbelief. I was certain that, just below her calm visage, lay a volcano, waiting to erupt. I had been to war and faced danger many times, but this was another kettle of fish altogether. They say that hell hath no fury as a woman scorned," but there is another saying, rarely used, that goes like this: "Hell hath no fury as a woman lost in the middle of a forest at night with an idiot husband."

"Maybe it's just a short patch of dirt road. I'll drive a bit further and see. "

"No. You won't! It's late now and I DO NOT want to sleep in a car in the middle of a forest. Turn around. We're going back!"

I meekly obeyed.

We drove in silence, passing back through Hendrikdal at 8.30pm. "Don't miss the turn-off!" I kept saying to myself, keeping my eye open for the Dollaaskraal sign.

The sign that said DOLLAASKRAAL 12KM, was very faded, and some of the paint had peeled off. There were a couple of bullet holes too. Not much else to do in Dollaaskraal I guess.

We *had* to be on the correct road now. According to my AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION map, there *were* no other options. Despite my eagerness to get to Bambi, I was taking it slowly because of my eyepatch. Jackie was seething silently. Asking her drive though, was out of the question. Fortunately, there were no cars at all on the road.

It was close to midnight when we pulled up into the BAMBI MOTEL parking. It was pitch dark. There were no lights to be seen in any of the windows, and when I tried the front door, it was locked. That was to be expected. It was very late, and they probably had put us down as a NO SHOW and gone to bed.

I knocked on the door. Nothing. I knocked a bit louder and a bit longer. Nothing. On the third try, I heard someone inside fumbling with keys.

‘Hang on. I’m coming!’

The key turned in the lock and a bleary-eyed man of about 45 appeared in the doorway, dressed in a faded blue terrycloth dressing gown.

“Evening. Can I help you?” he said, somewhat annoyed, but trying to hide it as best he could.

“Evening. Sorry to bother you so late. We have a booking for tonight. I got a bit lost.” I could hear Jackie “Harumph!” behind me as I said ‘bit lost’.

“No, I don’t think so he said. We are fully booked for tonight.”

My heart sank. I wanted to cry. “This can’t be happening to me!” my mind screamed.

“But I have a fax saying that booking is confirmed,” I persisted.

“Name?” he asked, walking around behind the front desk, and started to leaf through the BOOKINGS book.

“Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” I replied, hoping that it was *his* mistake and not mine.

“Yes, we do have a booking for a Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” My heart leapt with joy.

“But it’s for tomorrow night,” he continued.

My worst fears were confirmed. “Oh no! I messed up – AGAIN!” I thought despairingly.

Jackie was not impressed, but chimed in, “We have to sleep SOMEWHERE tonight. Do you know of any places around here that might have a spare room?”

“There *are* no places around here. But I tell you what I’ll do. Come with me.”

He opened the door for us, and we all stepped into the night. We waited for him to take the lead and then followed him across the parking lot and down a path on the opposite from the motel. It led to what seemed like the staff quarters, a building we had not spotted, it being so dark.

He knocked on the door. Less than 30 seconds later, a young male, who looked about 20 years old, answered the door with a ¹“Ja, meneer?”

²“Luister Piet, hierdie gaste het ‘n kamer dringend nodig. Jy moet asseblief vanaand in Fanie’s se kamer gaan slap.”

³“Ja oom. Geen probleem nie.”

¹ “Yes, sir?”

² “Listen, Piet. These guests need a room urgently. Please go sleep in Fanie’s room tonight.”

³ “Yes, sir. No problem.”

He turned to us and said “Piet, who is the chef here, will give up his bed for you tonight. It’s the best I can do for you at this late hour I’m afraid.”

Before I could thank him, Jackie quickly interjected, “That’s great. Thank you very much. Is there any chance of getting something to eat?”

It had been a long time since lunch, and, although we had been snacking on fruit, we were still both very hungry. I actually had been too anxious to think about food, but, now that she had mentioned it, I suddenly felt hungry.

“Ok. Seeing that Piet is now awake, I’ll ask him to make something. It will probably only be toasted sandwiches though. Are you Ok with that?”

“Yes, that will be fine.” Replied Jackie at once.

“Right then. Give Piet 20 minutes for the food. Come through to the reception when you wake up and I’ll make sure that your room is ready as early as possible. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” we chorused.

I went to fetch the luggage from the car. When I returned, Jackie had already gotten under the covers of the single bed. The silence was deafening. After almost five years together, I knew it was best to just keep quiet and give her time to cool down. Just like a radiator. The toasted sarmies arrived. Cheese and tomato – with generous sprinklings of salt and pepper.

⁴“Dankie, Piet.”

We wolfed them down and I got undressed and climbed into bed with my future-ex-wife. She did not protest.

DAY THREE. Tick. v

⁴ “Thank you, Piet”

Chapter Four – Bambi Burgers

Sleep was elusive. I kept berating myself for this unforgiveable mistake. I knew that somewhere in my luggage was the itinerary I had written. I remembered stuffing into my suitcase just before we left Durban. Waking early, I managed to slip out of bed without waking Jackie. She was, thankfully, a deep sleeper. My nose had been broken three times playing rugby I snored like a trumpet soloist. She seldom complained. The trick was to let her fall asleep before I did. She had once, however, given me a sleeping shirt as a Christmas present, with a wooden cotton reel sewn onto the back panel in an effort to prevent me from lying on my back. Subtle. I did wear it for a few months though.

Rummaging through my suitcase as silently as possible, I found the crumpled, slightly torn itinerary. And there it was, written in my best doctor scribble:

Day One – Drakensberg Sun. Overnight Drakensberg Sun,

Day Two – Royal Swazi Sun. Overnight Royal Swazi Sun.

Day Three - Royal Swazi Sun. Overnight Royal Swazi Sun.

Day Four- Bambi Motel.

And so on.

Looking for someone else to share the blame with, I wondered why the Royal Swazi Sun receptionist hadn't questioned our early departure. Maybe they were under strict instructions not to ask questions – just do as the guests wished.

“Morning,” said Jackie sleepily, startling me.

I turned. “Morning. How did you sleep?”

“Fine, thanks.”

It *must* have been a good sleep. She seemed to have pushed the RESET button.

She looked at me, a slight grin on her face and said “You’re an idiot, you know. I know you are trying your best, my love. We all make mistakes. I’m sorry for shouting at you. Let’s just hope that it is true what they say – bad things happen in threes. Come here.”

Stunned, I walked over to the bed.

She lifted the covers. “Join me.”

The real honeymoon had begun! It had only taken a 3-day ‘false start’, but things were looking up, and a certain THING was definitely UP!

All my fears, apprehensions and insecurities faded as she welcomed me deep between her thighs.

Day Four was off to a good, no GREAT, start!

Knowing that whomever was occupying the room we had reserved would probably be checking out 11am, which was the normal checkout time in most hotels, we lazed in bed talking and cuddling - her head rested on my chest. Love was in the air. By 10am we were ravenous. We dressed and went in search of nourishment.

The man from the night before was sitting behind the front desk, reading the morning papers, as we entered the establishment. He got to his feet as we approached.

“Ahh! Mr. and Mrs. Smith! Morning. How are you today? Did you manage to sleep OK?”

“Yes, thanks,” Jackie replied for both of us.

“Excellent! By the way, my name is Johannes, but you can call me Jan. I’m the owner.”

“Nice to meet you Jan,” I said, shaking his hand. “This is my new wife, Jackie.” Jackie did not shake hands but smiled in acknowledgement.

“Tell me, is it possible to get something to eat.” Asked Jackie.

“Sure. No problem. We have a little restaurant through that door over there. It is mainly for the guests to eat breakfast, but we have a limited menu with other options as well. Breakfast is normally from 7 to 10am, but if, you like, I can organise a breakfast for you. Or you can order off the menu. I’ll just charge it to your room. By the way, I won’t charge for the room or the food last night. Consider it a wedding present.”

“Thank you very much. That’s very kind of you,” smiled Jackie.

He led us through to the cosy restaurant and handed us a menu.

Jackie had a cheese omelette with sliced tomato on the side, and I went for the full English breakfast – something I rarely ate. I was more of a cereal man, with my usual breakfast being plain old Weetbix. I had a small bite of her fluffy omelette. It was delicious.

My belly, now full of dead pig, was gratified. I was sated.

“What do you wanna do today,” I asked my beautiful bride.

“I dunno. We had a long day yesterday. Maybe just chillax? We can call it a rest day.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” I agreed.

“It will give a chance to read my book,” she added.

“You mean books, plural,” I smiled.

Jackie was a prolific reader. She was also a speed reader. She could literally read three books in one day.

She laughed. “Maybe only one today.”

I came from a family of readers. My mother was more into romance novels, but my father read mostly non-fiction books. I never saw a TV until I was 12, so reading was my form of entertainment. My father encouraged reading and subscribed to *Reader’s Digest*.

As a youth, I read a few of the famous classics, although they were the condensed versions. I did, however, read the full version of *Tale of Two Cities* when I was only ten years old. But, when it came to volume, I was no match for Jackie. She had read a lot more books than me. Our taste in books was slightly different though. I loved Douglas Adams, and she was more of a Terry Pratchett fan.

She could finish a book in four hours and still retain all the information. I sometimes used to quiz her to see if she was actually following the plot. She never got a question wrong. Quite something. I had not packed a book to read. It had been the furthest thing from my mind. There were enough books in her bag for the both of us, but I had decided not to read today. I wanted to do 'my homework'.

After eating, we enquired what time our room would be ready.

"It's ready now. The guests left quite early this morning and housekeeping has finished in there. Where are your bags? I'll have them taken up to your room. You're in the *Paul Kruger* suite on the first floor."

"Ok. Great. We will be packed in about five minutes or so. You can send someone to fetch them then."

"Sure. No problem."

Our new room was exquisite. A brass four-poster bed, with a pile of various coloured cushions, was centred against the left wall, below a massive mirror with an ornate gold frame. A wall-to-wall blood-red fluffy carpet filled the room, the walls papered with shiny green wallpaper, contrasting sublimely with the pastel yellow curtains. Upon the walls, were simple oil paintings of what, I assumed, was the surrounding countryside, also with gold frames.

Jackie was ecstatic.

"Wow! This is lovely!" she gushed.

Personally, I'm not a big fan of brass beds. They tended to be too rickety for my bulk. But, as long as I had a happy wife, all was good in the universe. I did agree about the décor though. It was very tastefully done and had just the sort of historical feel to it that we both appreciated.

Jackie put on her 'reading shorts' – tattered old shorts I think she had had since she was still at school. I could relate. I still had a couple of old 'holy' t-shirts that I wore in public, much to Jackie's horror. She slipped on a t-shirt she had designed and sewn herself, a white sleeveless top with an African design across the front. I had married a very talented woman. Her dream was to be an artist, but, at this stage of her life, teaching paid the bills. She was practical. She did eventually open her own art shop.

While she settled down to read, I took a couple of the maps I had fetched out of the car and went to sit at the antique bureau, which was placed directly in front of the transom windows,

supplying a view of the grasslands. I needed to do my 'homework' for tomorrow's trip. We didn't need a repeat of yesterday now, did we?

"Ok. Today is day four," I began, collecting my thoughts. On the A4 exam pad I had found lying on the bureau, I began to write:

Day 5 – Pilgrim's Rest. Overnight Pilgrim's Rest.

Day 6 – Visit Blyde River Canyon and God's Window. Overnight Pilgrim's Rest.

Day 7 – Visit Sabie and White River. Overnight Middleberg.

Day 8 – Sun City. Overnight Cascades (at Sun City)

Day 9 – Cascades. Overnight Cascades.

Day 10 - Drive home.

Normally, I would never dream of defacing a map, but I was now tracing our route with a pen. I wasn't taking any chances. "Bad boy! Go to your room!" my father would have said.

Homework completed, I crawled into bed with Jackie and soon was fast asleep. My body needed it. The stress and lack of sleep the day before, had exhausted me. My stomach woke me up. I glanced at my watch. Three 'o clock. Time to eat.

"Hello sleepyhead," Jackie greeted me affectionately. "I wondered why it had gone silent - you're awake," she said, teasing me about my snoring.

"Hello dear."

She was still reading. Her big, rectangular, Jackie Onassis reading glasses made her look like a proper bookworm. *Bennie the Bookworm*. Or was it *Jackie the Bookworm*?

"I'm hungry. Are you?"

"I *am* a bit peckish. You know we have a car full of fruit, right?"

"I need something more substantial than that. Something meaty,"

We decided to take a drive around the area to see if we could find a place to eat. Jan had been so kind to us that we didn't feel it was right to get the Piet to cook us something. We still felt bad about kicking him out of his bed the night before.

It was a short drive. Nothing to see here – keep moving. Just miles and miles of fuck-all. Bambi seemed to have only 4 buildings – the post office, the police station, the motel and a 'tearoom'(corner store).

In the centre of the main road – and **only** road - in Bambi, was a fairly big building, perhaps 15 metres wide, that was painted with obligatory COCA-COLA sponsored signage: *BAMBI WINKEL & KO-OP*. The signage indicated that it sold COKE, which normally indicated that they would sell food as well. It also declared that they were the local co-operative – supplying feed and various farm tools and implements to the local farmers. We were, after all, deep in the

farmlands. Through the all-glass frontage, I could make out a couple of small tables with cheap 'diner-style' chairs, possibly remnants from the 60s.

"Let's take a look inside. It's literally the only place apart from the hotel."

"OK".

As you entered, on the left, there was a tiny eating area, which was what I had got a glimpse of from the car. On the right, was an old glass-fronted shop counter, displaying some cheese, boerewors and various pies. Behind that, there was a wall with shelves filled with sweets, chocolates, chips, cigarettes and other necessities, like shoe polish. That brought a smile to my dial. "*May I have a slab of chocolate and a tin of black shoe polish please?*" Basic necessities.

In the corner was a glass-fronted fridge with cold drinks, milk and some small blocks of margarine. There was a sign-posted door leading to the CO-OP, or, as the sign said – *KO-OP*.

There was another smaller door, presumably leading to a kitchen.

Turning my attention to the eating area once again, I noticed an easel-type blackboard with words written neatly in white chalk BLOCK letters:

CHIPS –	LARGE – 50c	SMALL –25c
HAMBURGER – R2.00 / with cheese and tomato –	R2.50	
VETKOEK –	50c each	
KOEKSUSTERS -	R1.00 pkt.	

That was it – the whole menu.

I looked at Jackie and we both smiled. We were definitely deep in Afrikaner territory.

"I'm going to try the hamburger and chips. You?"

She laughed.

"I guess so. We had vetkoek yesterday."

A swarthy, unshaven man with a *boep* appeared. There was so much chest hair overflowing from the top of the white vest he was wearing, that I was thinking he should have it waxed. He was hirsute, to say the least, and once he spoke, I knew instantly that he was Portuguese - most likely from Mozambique.

Mozambique, Angola and Portuguese Guinea, had been the three Portuguese colonies in Africa until the mid-70s. Mozambique had been ruled by the Portuguese for almost 500 years until the Mozambican War of Independence (1964-1975). Portuguese Guinea (now Guinea Bissau) had been ruled by them for almost 400 years until it gained independence in 1974. Angola (where I had fought during the South African Border War), started out as a Portuguese settlement in 1575, in the area now known as Luanda, and grew over the years until the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) officially set the colony's borders.

Portugal, in the early 70s, was having problems of its own, with a failed coup attempt and the Carnation Revolution. During the years 1974 to 1976, it began to transition from authoritarian rule to provisional military government to a representative democracy. They had neither the finances nor the appetite to continue running their African territories.

Within a year of Mozambican independence, about 250 000 Portuguese had either left, or been expelled from the country. Some of the expelled Mozambican Portuguese chose to go home to their newly democratic country, whilst many decided to make South Africa their home. There was now a large Portuguese diaspora in the country, with a number of them, for some unknown reason, owning corner stores. This guy fitted the profile.

The Portuguese language sounds a bit like Mandarin to me, with its distinctive nasal diphthongs. I can never tell whether they have been drinking or not.

“Would you like to order something?” he asked with a distinct Portuguese accent.

“Two hamburgers and chips please,” I answered.

“Ok. Ten minutes. Please have a seat. Anything to drink?”

“Just a coke for me,” I replied, looking at Jackie,

“Do you have any rooibos?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have that please.”

“Ok”. He disappeared through the small doorway.

The drinks arrived shortly. Jackie sipped her tea. “I miss my tea,” she lamented.

Rooibos is a uniquely South African tea, made from fynbos, and is known for its rich antioxidant content. We both only drank rooibos when at home, but coke seemed a more appropriate choice when eating junk food.

A few minutes later, our food arrived. I looked at my ‘hamburger’ and snorted – the hamburger patty was between slices of toast. I lifted the top slice and saw melted cheese slices, onion rings and some sliced tomato. It may have been an unusual way to present a hamburger, but the patty was HUGE! It was an inch thick, and a chord of patty protruded from each of the four sides. It dwarfed the toast. I guessed that it was either impossible to source hamburger buns in Bambi, or that the burger was just **too** BIG for them.

My mouth, being smaller than a goldfish’s, was never going to be able to bite into the burger.

“Can I get a knife and fork please?” I said, rather loudly, as he was across the room. He looked at me as if I had asked him for a loan, and mumbled something under his breath, undoubtedly a Portuguese expletive, and disappeared through the small door once more, returning, seconds later with some cutlery.

‘Thank you.’

I grabbed the plastic bottle of tomato sauce (ketchup) and proceeded to drown my burger. Now armed with suitable weapons, I cut my food into bite-sized pieces and swiftly devoured the monster burger. I am no burger expert, but that was the best burger I had ever eaten. The Irish believe that everyone has a potato-sized hole in their belly, and nothing but a potato can fill it. I thought I might have just busted that myth - half a cow will fill any hole.

It was certainly no supermarket-bought frozen beef patty. Somewhere through that small doorway, there was possibly a long-suffering wife, hands covered in mince and spices, making monster patties and dreaming of the 'good old days' back in Maputo.

"Surprisingly good," I commented.

"Not bad," said Jackie. She was not much of a meat eater and made a point of avoiding fried food. When she *did* eat meat, it was usually flame-grilled rump on a braai.

We paid, and headed back to the motel, spending the rest of the afternoon reading and napping. It was good to have a lazy day. Recharge the batteries. I was now regretting having planned such a long honeymoon trip. I think Jackie would have been happier spending ten days lazing by the pool at a luxurious resort, drinking cocktails and reading. Too late. We were committed.

Jan had announced that dinner was at 7pm – and what a dinner it was! Oxtail casserole in a thick gravy sauce, roast potatoes, rice, and a side of veggies – pumpkin (my favourite), spinach (her favourite) and green beans. Piet certainly knew how to cook. Afrikaners, especially the women, were traditionally great cooks, so maybe he had learnt from his mother. Even though our bellies were now stuffed, we somehow managed to eat more than one of the several tempting desserts that were served after the main course, a selection, which included sherry trifle, tiramisu, and sliced peaches with hot custard. Being the greedy glutton that I am, I also wrapped a piece of chocolate cake in a napkin and took it up to the room.

Bellies full – eyes closed. We were stuffed, and it did not take long for us to fall asleep.

A drama free day! Yay!

DAY FOUR. Tick. ✓

Chapter Five – Pilgrims

After breakfast, I settled our account, thanking Jan for his outstanding hospitality. We hit the road, heading north, along the R36 towards Lydenburg. It was a mere 108km to Pilgrim's Rest, according to the AA map, and I was feeling confident there was no chance of error. No unplanned detours today.

Lydenburg, originally the Dutch settlement *Lijdenburg* (Town of Suffering), sits on the Sterkspruit tributary of the Lepelle River and is sometimes referred to as the 'fly-fishing capital' of South Africa. There were also a few trout farms in the area, so, if your morning fly-fishing in the streams left you fishless and frustrated, you could lift your spirits by fishing in one of the trout farms in the afternoon, where you were almost guaranteed to catch a trout.

The famous Boer leader, Andries Pretorius (after which Pretoria is named), made Lydenburg the capital of the short-lived Lydenburg Republic (*De Republiek Lydenburg in Zuid Afrika*). It lay on what used to be an important wagon route between Delagoa Bay (now Maputo) in Portuguese Mozambique, which was desirable, as it was free from British control.

In 1873, alluvial gold was discovered and the Lydenburg gold fields were proclaimed. When the *First Boer War* broke out in 1880, the British then established a garrison in order to control the gold fields. After an 84-day siege, the Boers reclaimed the town. The main conflicts in those days were **white on white** and the Boers lived in relative harmony with the local black communities, with some of the farms in the area being purchased by blacks. But when *The Land Act of 1913* was passed, it severely restricted black ownership in South Africa, and a series of forced removals began in the early 1940s, continuing into the 60s. Apartheid at its worst.

If you continue through Lydenburg, and take the R37 to Sabie, you will find yourself going over the Long Tom Pass. 'Long Tom' is a name given to a certain type of field gun which had been used in many different battles in the last few centuries, until more advanced artillery was developed in the early twentieth century. The particular type of 'Long Tom' that the Boers used as a field gun, was a *155mm Geusot*. The Pass rises to an altitude of 2150 metres above sea level.

But that was not on the itinerary for today. We got to a town so small, that it rivalled Bambi for the "Dorp of the Year". *GOEDEWILL* said the sign. It was so tiny, that the population (and the whole town's IQ) were probably below 20, and if you blinked you missed it. But the best (worst) was yet to come.

COROMANDEL. I suspect that the one-horse town of *Coromandel* no longer had a horse, and that it had died of boredom. I now understood the meaning of 'GOD-forsaken'. An hour later, we entered Lydenburg.

South Africa has thousands of 'dorps' – a term we use disparagingly for the thousands of tiny towns that litter the landscape of South Africa. Towns that have an Afrikaner background, most of them founded in the 19th century or before. Towns that have nothing to offer.

Towns that are stuck in a time warp. Inevitably, the main road in a 'dorp' will be called *Kerk Straat* (Church Street) which will lead to the tiny central town square. Somewhere around the square will be a *Nederduitse Gereeformeerde Kerk* (NGK). The NGK church was originally from the Netherlands, and, when *Jan van Riebeeck* decided to start a Dutch settlement in what is now Cape Town, the settlers realised that they need a full time *predikant* (preacher) to come and look after the flock, as the majority of *The Dutch East India Company's* men belonged to the NGK. Three years later, Johan van Arckel was shipped out to the settlement and became its first full time minister.

When the 200 or so French Huguenot refugees arrived from France in 1688, it became apparent that the two groups held similar religious beliefs and the Huguenots eventually assimilated into the NGK. During the Napoleonic era wars, France occupied the Netherlands, and the British, not wanting the French to occupy the Cape, decided to occupy it first. The result was that the NGK flock in South Africa was unable to source new *predikants* (ministers) from the Netherlands. They were not willing to go preach in British-controlled territory. This led to one of the strangest outcomes. The British somehow managed to persuade Scottish Presbyterian ministers to 'fill in' for the Dutch NGK *predikants*.

It would have made a great Monty Python sketch:

"Och aye the noo. Let us prrrray. Lorrdd, have merrrcy upon us. OURRRR fatherrrr which arrrrt in heaven...."

An old deaf *tannie* (old lady) nudging her husband and asking:

⁵*"Wat se daai man. Hy klink snaaks."*

I can picture all the flies on the wall dropping dead - dying from laughter.

If you visit the Cape Province, you will see many examples of Cape Dutch architecture, especially in Stellenbosch and surrounding area. Normally farm buildings, they are usually quite long, with white-washed walls, thatched roofs and convex/concave rounded clock gables – often with dormer windows and exterior wooden shutters. As someone who loves old architecture, I find the style very appealing.

As the Boers trekked across southern Africa, the style had spread, which resulted in it being found as far north as present-day Zambia and in EVERY dorp in South Africa.

Lydenburg had some prime examples of this architecture. The noon day sun bounced glare off the newly white-washed farmstead we passed as we climbed the last hill into the town. I had to take a photo, so I stopped.

"What I view!" I exclaimed to no-one in particular.

Jackie, who was now standing next to me peering through the old pair of binoculars that my father had given us, agreed "Lovely."

⁵ "What is that man saying? He sounds weird."

The big blue sky hovered over valley before us, mountains threatening to pierce their cyan veneer. If you love the outdoors, there are worse places to be than Lydenburg. Not the town itself, but the surrounding area. Apart from the trout farms, there are easy hiking trails, cycling trails and even 4x4 trails - something for every type of outdoor enthusiast. I was an outdoor enthusiast but was not *as* enthusiastic as the guys who climbed mountains or cycled 100km a day over rough terrain. My idea of 'activity' was a short hike of about 2 hours and then having a braai.

"Look," Jackie said, "I can see group of horse riders down there."

"Where?" I said straining my eyes and seeing nothing.

She handed me the binoculars. "Oh, I see them now."

In my opinion, horses could go jump (pun intended).

I had gone on many horse rides before – all, bar one, unsuccessful. The horses I had tried to ride, had either reared up on their hind legs, trying to throw me off, or had just refused to move. But I had persevered. Until that one fateful day.

We had gone for a family getaway weekend to one of the Drakensberg resorts. It was a Saturday morning and my parents wanted to play tennis, which was more of a piss-up than actual sport and they needed to find some activity to occupy my brother and I, while they used tennis as an excuse to drink. My mother hardly drank – she loved to socialise - but my father was fond of a few vodkas and coke.

A horse ride was arranged for my brother and me. The groom was under strict instructions to walk in front of the two horses and just lead our horses by the reins, slowly along the road. No trotting, no galloping, no cross country – just a sedate stroll. He did as he was told.

The dirt road was lined with barbed-wire fencing on both sides. My brother had picked up a stick before mounting his horse and was pretending it was a rifle – 'shooting' at the birds that sat on the telephone wires. Bored, he lowered his 'rifle', and the horse caught a glimpse of it. "Snake! It probably thought and reared up whinnying, throwing him off in the process. Fearing that he might be kicked to death by the crazy horse, he dived headfirst through the barbed wire, long thin lines of red appearing magically down his arms and legs as if some invisible artist was using him as a canvas.

My horse was now freaking out and turned and bolted back towards the stables with me clutching desperately to its neck – too scared to scream. It was going full tilt. I felt the saddle loosening. This did not fill me with joy. It suddenly gave way completely and slid under the horse's belly. I was too scared to let go, still hanging from the horse's neck, grabbing handfuls of its mane, the left foreleg of the horse crashing repeatedly into my left shoulder as it did its best impression of a rodeo horse. We had not gone too far from the resort, and I saw the upside-down gates as my frenzied horse galloped through them - human limpet still attached.

It seemed the horse was intent on delivering me to my father and headed straight towards the tennis court, where the adults, all splendid in their white outfits, were still pretending to

play tennis. I could see some of them, now alarmed, starting to panic, knocking over a drinks table in their hurry to get out of the path of this possibly rabid horse.

“Let go! Let go” my father urged. I obeyed, somehow ending up on a grass patch completely unharmed. The horse was still not happy – the slipped saddle worrying it into a frenzy. It started kicking furiously, slowly turning in a circle after each completed kick. A thick steel chain, which was used to block off the road to the staff quarters, snapped like a piece of raw spaghetti. I was very relieved not to have been kicked in the head.

Having done almost a complete circle of kicks, it took off once more – right onto the now empty tennis court. It leapt over the net, like a tennis champion, and found its path blocked by the clubhouse. The two horse grooms came dashing onto the tennis court and managed to trap the horse and get the saddle off. It immediately calmed it down, enabling them to lead it back to the stables.

Since I met Jackie, I hadn’t attempted to ride a horse again and was not planning on ever doing so, but we had once again gone to the Drakensberg for a weekend getaway, and she had suggested horse-riding. She knew that I loved animals - we had a dog and four cats – but I had never shared my harrowing experience with her, so she was none the wiser. I didn’t back out though. Although nervous, I wanted to put on a brave face for my future ex-wife. It was a daunting prospect. Horses just didn’t like me. It dented my ego. I thought they were magnificent creatures and I wanted them to like me as well.

We got to the stables and were issued with riding hats. With the aid of a step, I managed to mount my horse and we proceeded in single file to the edge of the camp. No more manicured lawns and trimmed hedges. It reminded me of the Wild West – dry savannah, mountains, with a few clumps of trees here and there. And thickets of thorn bush.

I could almost hear my horse thinking “Sucker,” as he ran right through a thicket, and I instinctively dived off the horse to save myself from looking like a lion kill. It was particularly depressing as I was literally trying to ‘get back in the saddle’ after my last episode.

My arms were shredded. Jackie looked more amused than concerned. Over lunch, later that day, I confessed my fear of horses and recounted my *slippery saddle* story.

“Well, there’s only one thing to do.”

“Try again tomorrow.”

“Eish. I’m not so sure about that.”

She said “Look. Horses are just big dogs. They can smell fear. A dog doesn’t bite you if you are confident. Horses are the same.” She was not one to accept weakness or defeat.

So, the next day, I found myself back in the saddle, concentrating on being emotionless. I reckoned if there were zero emotions the horse would be unable to read me and therefore not bully me. My plan worked. My *Mr. Roboto* act had tricked the horsie. Yay! We completed a whole circuit of the horse trail and I even got to gallop back to the stables without any incidents. Thank you, Jackie!

Tired of watching the riders, Jackie put the binoculars back in the car and took a couple of oranges out of the box on the backseat. It was too early for lunch, but we were just peckish enough for a snack. I took the opportunity to consult the map. Twenty kilometres more along the R36 before we had to turn off on the R533 towards *Pilgrim's Rest*. A walk in the park.

Pilgrim's Rest is a protected provincial heritage site, a museum town, frozen in time. It was the second Transvaal gold fields, attracting a rush of prospectors in 1873. During the 1970s, it became a popular tourist destination and I had visited there once before with my parents. The town consisted largely of the original buildings, constructed out of corrugated iron – with a stoep running along the front of each structure. Each building was a museum.

There was no accommodation in *Pilgrim's Rest*. All accommodation had to be outside of the protected heritage site, so we were staying at a private home – about 10km outside of town - which had a subdivision which was used as a bed and breakfast. A family-run affair.

After the alluvial gold began to dry up, the bigger companies used their deeper pockets to begin mining the deeper gold-bearing ore. This necessitated an investment in heavy machinery and a proper infrastructure. Needing electricity to run the tramway and the giant ore-crushers, the mine engineers built a hydro-electric plant to produce enough power for the mine operations and the town.

It is interesting to note that *Pilgrim's Rest* was the second town to have street electricity in South Africa. Kimberly was the first – another mining town. Its other claim to fame was that it was the location of the 'emergency mint' that occurred during The Second Boer War, which struck the famous, and extremely rare, *Veld Pond*.

Within the hour, we were booked into *Country Cottage*, our 'home' for the next two nights. The owner of the establishment, a lovely lady called Rosemary, welcomed us warmly as she unlocked the gate for us.

"Welcome to my humble abode," she said.

She insisted that we have 'tea and a chat' before doing anything. Her son, Peter, was tasked with getting our bags to our appointed room, while we enjoyed a pot of rooibos and a slice of fruitcake. I may have had more than one slice. She had a very plummy English accent.

"You sound English," I said inquisitively. I had never been to England at that stage, but had watched a lot of British comedy. Most of my work colleagues were Brits as well.

"Indeed, I am," she replied smiling. "Surprised?"

Jackie was giving me that "Don't be rude!" look, but I didn't consider it to be rude – merely conversation. Rude is relative. Throwing tea in her face would be rude. Conversation was not.

"I am, actually. Isn't this *Afrikanerland*?"

She laughed heartily. "You're right. It is. My husband is Afrikaans. We met at university in England."

“Is that so? My father is Afrikaans, and my mother is French, so my parents raised my brother and me as English speakers, due to necessity. I suppose you can call me a *de-tribalised* Dutchman,” I said laughing.

“Yes, they say love is blind,” continued Rosemary. “We *did* live in England after completing our studies, but a combination of the weather and his father falling ill, made him return to South Africa – dragging me along with him, of course!” More laughter. I enjoyed chatting with her.

“But why here?”

“Oh. Simple really. His family farm is not far away and now that his father has passed, he runs it. I’m not terribly pleased about it. I hardly get to see him much anymore. He starts early and finishes late. But he does make a point of being home for supper.”

I smiled. It reminded me of a British comedian I had once seen. His favourite line was: “You can call me anything – but NOT late for supper!”

“So, we’ll get to meet him later then,” I queried.

“Yes.”

“Does he work weekends as well?”

“Saturdays, yes. But Sunday is braai day. No work then. It’s the only time he gets to see his friends and relax. We usually invite a few friends around for a get together. I normally have to kick them out after a few bottles of *Klipdrift*.”

More laughter from me. *Klipdrift* was a popular South African brandy often bought by Afrikaners. It was affectionately known as *Klippies*.

Jackie, forever the teacher asked, “What did you both study, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“No, not at all. I was doing a BCom, and he was studying Agricultural Science. His intention was to come straight back to the farm once he had completed his studies, but then, of course, he met me, and his plans changed.”

Jackie glanced at me, then back to Rosemary, and said “I know what you mean.”

“What do you mean by that,” I said half defensively, half curious.

“Well dear, I had no intention of getting married so young. I was going to wait until I was earning enough as an artist before I got married.”

“And then you went and proposed to me, you silly girl,” I chirped, feeling quite good about myself – the man who she had changed her plans for.

“What was I thinking?” she said jokingly, and we all had a good laugh.

“Rosemary, thanks so much for the warm welcome and the tea. I enjoyed our chat. We are going to pop in at Pilgrim’s Rest and take a peek. We can chat more when your hubby is here. What time is dinner?”

“Yes, it was nice chatting to you. We will certainly talk more later. Dinner is at 6.30. Enjoy your afternoon. See you later.”

Pilgrim's Rest is a small place. We parked in the packed tourist parking lot and set out on foot. After a quick look at *The Old Bank*, we entered *The Old Post Office*, which was still a working post office and part of the official South African postal services. The ‘postmaster’ dressed in period clothes (which I thought was a nice touch) nodded his head in greeting as we walked in.

Photography was invented in 1826, so by 1873, when the first prospectors arrived, photographs were of a decent quality, and there were many detailed photos documenting like as it was in those early days. Photographs were used as postcards in those days, with the miners writing on the back of the photographs and posting them back to Britain. The ones that were British, of course.

We did a circuit of the two small rooms, slowly examining each of the photographs, which were protected by panes of glass to prevent anyone touching them (or stealing them). History is a fascinating subject, best appreciated visually. It appeared that some of the postcards had been donated to the museum, as they had ROYAL MAIL stamped on them, obviously having reached the recipients in Britain. I read a couple of them. They were all filled with optimism and the belief of imminent riches. Most of them showed groups of thin, bearded men, in various stages of alluvial panning, all with a manic stare in their eyes – yet all smiling enthusiastically for the camera.

The next two buildings were also small - corrugated iron museums - one with a variety of tools and implements used during that period, the other showing the progression of the mining operations from the alluvial mining in the 1870s to the much bigger underground mining operations that TGME had developed. The former, had an assortment of kitchen gadgets that I could not figure out, but I did find the old biscuit tins and food containers very interesting and it made me think about how long it would have taken to order something from the Motherland.

The first telegraph line between Europe and South Africa was laid in 1879, connecting in Durban. That was the easy part. You could send your orders via wagon train to Durban and they would telegraph your order to England. Once the order was ready, it was loaded onto either the *Castle Mail Packet Company* or the *Union Line* ships. The voyage from Portsmouth to Cape Town was between 21 and 24 days, weather-permitting, and another 3 or 4 days longer to Durban. Then it was loaded onto the waiting wagon trains and taken to *Pilgrim's Rest*. No wonder AMAZON is so popular!

I looked at the shelves of the old colourful tins – *HUNTLEY & PALMERS BISCUITS*; *KEENS MUSTARD*; *LIPTONS TEA*; *BAKERS CHOCOLATE COMPANY* and *BIRD'S CUSTARD*. Lipton's tea was a familiar name, but the others were not.

Life was tough back in the old days. Actually, life has always been tough. I think the question is not how tough life is – but how tough the people are. It is natural for each generation to want a better life for their children. Sometimes, it is possible, depending on various factors; what country you live in, opportunity, sacrifice, or just really on how determined you are to improve your quality of life. The parents who manage to give their children better education or opportunities - normally through hard work and sacrifice – do so in the hope that it will not all be in vain.

Unfortunately, history tends to repeat itself. Civilizations eventually become lazy, as successive generations let work ethics slide and choose a more pampered life. This had been very obvious on a recent nine-month trip to the US. I was living down in SE Florida, and there was a lot of development going on. It occurred to me that I had not seen one electrical, plumbing or engineering contractor under the age of 50. It is just one of the many crises, the so-called, number-one economy in the world is suffering – not to mention widespread drug abuse and the housing shortage.

Yes, the world is literally filled with millions of skilled workers and artisans, all desperate to get into first world countries. The H1 and H2 visa programs in the US *does* allow certain categories of skilled workers to work in the US – but only temporarily. If you look at a graph representing the growth of the world’s population over the last 60 years and compare it with a graph showing job creation over the last 60 years, you will see the obvious problem. The world is on an unsustainable trajectory.

In the last 10 years alone, the economic migrant and war refugee problem has resulted in an exponential number of desperate people risking their lives trekking through deserts or risking their lives in unseaworthy vessels, with nothing but hope. For the majority of these migrants and refugees, Europe and the UK are geographically the easiest to reach. Nobody even bothers trying to get into India, China or Russia.

There is much made of the constant flow of ‘illegal aliens’ coming into the US from Mexico, but for all the talk about ‘building a wall’, there is NO WAY it will ever happen. The US has always relied on cheap labour from Mexico to keep prices down, as they generally will work for much less money than the official minimum wage. There has always been a tacit understanding that if you keep your nose clean and work like a slave, you will not be deported.

My personal opinion is that the ‘unofficial’ policy regarding illegal crossings from Mexico is: “Just slow them down – don’t stop them.” And, ever since *Tsar Putin* lost his marbles, food prices have soared globally, with *Uncle Biden* and the Fed scrambling to find ways to reduce inflation. One thing I know about Americans – they don’t care too much who is president, as long as the economy is booming. So, when faced with a choice between clamping down on a source of cheap labour or bringing down inflation, *Uncle Biden* is going to choose the latter every time.

I’m not sure if he has a plan to tackle the skills shortage though. Even truck drivers are in short supply. You don’t even need to study for a job like that. But it requires focus and long hours of concentration – not suited to the Gen Z. The interstates would be littered with burning wrecks, as the new batch of truck drivers battled to resist checking their statuses and updates

on *Insta, Tik-Tok, Twitter* and *Facebook*. Technology has many benefits – social media – not so much. For a lot of them, it is a case of not knowing any better. It has always been the norm for them. But us older folk cringe when we see how, in only 15 short years, social media has revolutionised the way people think, behave and interact. It is an angry generation – and full of angst. LIKES and VIEWS dominate. The community is largely confused – or angry – or both.

The angry trolls on TWITTER will always find a way to be haters – no matter how positive your post is. TIK-TOK has some funny videos, but now everybody wants to be a TIK-TOK influencer. That is not a skill that is going to fix your plumbing. If you handed me a CV with ‘Influencer’ listed under EXPERIENCE, I would hastily show you the door. INSTAGRAM has improved slightly and has many informative and interesting reels – a step in the right direction as far as I am concerned. Mark Zuckerberg seems to have the best platforms – under the META umbrella – FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM and WHATSAPP.

Sadly though, and I’m generalising, too much time is spent by Gen Z on social media. Don’t even get me started on gamers! Gen Z have become ‘affirmation addicts’, needing it as keenly as a junkie. This has created a ‘lost’ generation. They spend too much time in their heads or online instead of working hard or doing exercise. Everyone who spends too much time on social media is probably suffering some sort of identity crisis. We have the over-sensitive ‘woke’ segment, who can turn anything on its head and cry foul. You have the segment that introduces itself with its preferred pronouns – not sure if they want to identify with as a pencil or a cat. And then we have the ‘cancel culture’ segment – a close relative of the jokers – sorry, I meant ‘*wokers*’.

I don’t know if there is one specific cause for this state of affairs – or if anyone is at fault. Who do we blame? Civilizations evolve (are still evolving?). People multiply. Eventually, the perfect storm arrives, and like every civilization before it, ours will disintegrate, probably violently, into oblivion. Unless climate change wins the race. Are we going to stop trying to shelter our kids from the hardships we faced? Maybe we should stop. Maybe they need some tough love. A sense of identity and a Calvinistic work ethic.

It might also be a good idea to somehow slow the rate of overpopulation. My plan would be to come up with some sort of ‘means test’ before people were allowed to procreate. Or make it mandatory to get a licence to have kids. This may seem like a radical proposal right now, but history is full of radical proposals that were adopted during desperate times. I foresee it happening in the not too very distant future. And no, I’m not being hypocritical – I don’t have any biological kids.

Overpopulation is the root cause of the world’s socio-economic and environmental problems. Apart from the environmental impact of 8 billion people all wanting energy security, water security, food security and housing, there just aren’t enough jobs in the world. Something has to give eventually. It is nearer than you think. I suggest that you get off social media, grab your knees, pucker up – and kiss your ass goodbye! We have reached a nexus of crises and have now reached the point of no return. *Carpe diem!*

There are approximately 200 countries in the world, which in effect, leaves the fate of our planet in the hands of mostly corrupt politicians who, unbelievably, DON’T HAVE TO take a

means test – or have ANY qualifications – to rule the world. Frightening. Think about that for a moment. Then practice your pucker. Rant over...

Our next stop was the graveyard. All of the headstones were laid facing in the same direction, except for the *'Robber's Grave'*, laid at right angles to the rest. Legend has it that two fortune hunters, good friends, had gotten very drunk one night, and one of them, man named Scott, being unable to find his purse in his drunken state, had accused his friend Spencer of theft. Afraid for his life, Spencer had fled into the night. Scott caught up with him and shot Spencer dead near the church, site of the present-day graveyard, whereafter Spencer was secretly buried. When Scott sobered up the next morning, he found his purse in his tent, and, filled with remorse, committed suicide, and now lies next to Spencer in an unmarked grave. It reminded me of Romeo and Juliet.

Our final stop was the *Alanglade House Museum*, built by the TGME mining company in 1915 as a residence for the mine manager. It is a large double story building which contrasts sharply with the other corrugated iron buildings in town, testimony to the high status the mine manager of the period enjoyed. It is furnished with many antiques and various items from the early 1900s.

Jackie was in her element. "I want a house just like this!" she exclaimed. Little did I know that the time that she would soon become a keen collector of antiques not long thereafter – with the help of my check book. We had now seen everything of interest in the bustling metropolis of Pilgrim's Rest. It was time to head back to *Country Cottage* for dinner. Jackie played our *One Hit Wonders* tape as we drove, and *Don't Worry, Be Happy* by Bobby McFerrin played as we both sang along.

Arriving with an hour to spare, Rosemary opened a bottle of Merlot and poured us each a glass. We drank and chatted, waiting for her husband to arrive. Half an hour later, a Toyota bakkie drove into the driveway and a well-built man, wearing a slouch hat, emerged. He was wearing what I like to call 'the farmer's uniform' – khaki shorts with a leather belt and a short-sleeve button up shirt with four alternating patches of grey and pale blue on the front. He looked like a no-nonsense sort of guy – big, tough-looking, with a serious demeanour. As he entered the lobby, he took off his leather hat and placed it on the hat rack.

"Welcome!" he greeted us in a booming voice. It was a voice of authority – the voice of a man used to giving orders – not taking them.

He joined us in the living room, stopping to pour himself a glass of wine before he sat down in a comfy armchair. He crossed his legs, and I noticed the thick khaki socks, drawn up to just below his knees, and his *veldskoene*.

He stood up again. "Sorry. That is very rude of me. I'm Jean-Pierre, but you can call me JP," he said, offering his outstretched hand to me. I rose and shook his hand, impressed by his vice-like grip. I do like a strong handshake. It showed confidence. It was one of those first impressions that were seldom wrong. Men who shook hands in a limp-wristed, 'dead fish' manner were not real men.

Aware of his strength, he gently shook hands with Jackie, who had not bothered to get up. It was her belief that men stood, and women sat. It was the same with doors. Men opened doors for women – not the other way around.

Little did JP know just how strong Jackie was. Her dainty looking hands were weapons of mass destruction. Ever since one of my senior work colleagues had shown her how to make a proper fist, I had been on the receiving end of some very painful blows. She was a natural pugilist. When we argued, she would eventually just give up trying to show me the error of my ways and resort to punching me. I was twice her size, so I could not retaliate. I sucked it up. After all, I was a rugby player. I could take a hit. Force equals mass times acceleration. Her tiny fists did not weigh much, but she was lightning fast, and could deliver devastating force with her fists, her sharp knuckles burrowing into muscles and stinging like hell. My fists were sledgehammers compared to her mace-like fists.

JP sat back down.

“Busy day?” I asked, making small talk.

“Every day is a busy day. Don’t ever become a farmer.”

I smiled, then continued, “Jean-Pierre is a French name. Are you descended from the French Huguenots?”

“Ja. That’s right.”

“My grandfather on my father’s side is of Dutch descentance, but he married a woman of Huguenot heritage. I’m a half-breed.”

“Ja-nee. I think that all of the families that have been in South Africa for a few centuries have similar stories.”

“Yes. I’m sure, “I agreed.

Jackie, not wanting to be left out of the conversation, which she thought was being monopolised by the men, asked “What do you farm?”

“Citrus mainly, but also sunflowers. And I have some cattle as well.”

“I wouldn’t call 200 head of cattle, ‘some’,” interjected Rosemary, not allowing her husband’s modesty to hide the fact that they had a large farm.

The wine was finished, so Rosemary got up and headed for the kitchen, asking us to take our seats at the long 8-seater dining room table as she vanished through the doorway. I couldn’t tell what sort of wood it was, but it glistened with some sort of wax coating.

“Tambotie,” said JP, noticing me feeling the tabletop. “My father made it.”

“Excellent craftsmanship,” I commented, admiringly.

“I do a bit of woodworking as well when I can, which is seldom,” said JP.

“It’s a great hobby. I’ve just started building a workshop in my garage. I haven’t got many tools yet, but I’ll get there,” I added.

Rosemary placed an ethnic-print placemat in front of each of us, which she had probably bought at the roadside stall selling curios and handicrafts we had seen along the way, and proceeded to dish up.

First, she placed a huge steak on each plate before dishing up the potato wedges. In the middle of the table was a square wooden board with serving dishes filled with assorted veggies, and one small pot of rice.

Rys, vleis en aartappels (rice, meat and potatoes). The food of kings. The best thing about cattle farmers is that they have the best steaks. There are very few male South African vegetarians, if any. We are a nation of meat eaters.

“Maybe they have less than 200 cattle now,” I surmised as I tucked into the biggest steak I had ever seen. It was done medium rare - perfectly pink on the inside yet slightly burnt on the outside, every bite melting in my mouth, as the garlic and thyme sauce caressed my tongue. Pure bliss. The difference between sex and steak is that you can always have a steak.

As I sat there, my taste buds doing the tango in celebration, I felt quite good with myself. The honeymoon was back on track. It had been the perfect day. Almost as good as Messi felt when he finally tasted World Cup glory in Qatar, scoring two goals in the process.

DAY FIVE. Tick. ✓

Chapter Six – London Calling

The sound of JP's bakkie starting aroused me from my slumber. "A farmer's work is never done," I thought as I listened to him leave his engine running as he opened the gate, drove through, and then got out and closed it again and finally drove off. Jackie was still fast asleep.

I felt refreshed. Our bed was a huge king-sized bed, allowing us room to sprawl. There was a big, thick winter duvet on the bed, and extra woolly blankets folded in the wardrobe if we needed them. Humans spend about a third of their lives in bed, and I believed in quality over quantity. I could exist on 6 to 7 hours of sleep, but if the pillows were not just right, I battled to fall asleep. These pillows were just right. Big, firm pillows. And I needed two to fall asleep. Fortunately, we had four of them. Jackie had kicked one of hers off the bed during the night. She preferred slightly smaller pillows, but she had not complained.

I decided that I was not as warm as I would like, gently slipped out of bed, and took the two woolly blankets out of the wardrobe and softly lay them on top of the duvet. I hate being cold. Durban weather is mild. Our winter consists of about three weeks a year when the temperature drops below 19C. I am a child of the sun.

It always stupefied me why so many people lived in cold climes. What were they smoking? Dressing up in layers so thick that they were unable to scratch their noses – their arms trapped in what felt like a body cast. Most of the time, you couldn't even *feel* your nose once you stepped outside, let alone scratch it. Snow, ice, slush, mud. What a life! I had once peed in my pants, my numb fingers frozen stiff, unable to grab my zipper, on a trip to the Drakensberg. We had gone bobsledding in the snow, and I was frozen like a popsicle. At least I never made any yellow snow.

I thought it was just ridiculous that people would willingly live in cold weather. And yet, every year, countries like NORWAY, SWEDEN, FINLAND and DENMARK featured in the TOP TEN on the *World Happiness Rankings*. Go figure. The only possible explanation for this, in my mind, was that nobody in those countries had ever travelled below 44 degrees north. If you have never had something, you won't miss it. I guess it's like being a virgin.

Rosemary had told us that we could eat breakfast at any time, preferably between 7 and 9, as she was going shopping. It was 8am now. I had been lazing in bed, going over the day's itinerary in my head. I had lost track of time. I tended to do that a lot - daydream.

I leant over and give Jackie a peck on the cheek.

'Whaaaat?' she groaned.

"Wakey, wakey, sleepy head. We should get ready for breakfast."

It was a simple breakfast. Oats, bacon, eggs, toast and jam, with a choice of tea or coffee. It had been ages since I had eaten oats. Being in Africa, some of our popular brands had African-themed names, like Jungle Oats, Lion Lager, Simba Chips and so on. I was brought up on Jungle Oats. But these days I had cereal for breakfast. It was just laziness. Oats took too long. As a

kid, I had a routine. Once the oats were dished up into my bowl, I would dig a moat around the edge of the bowl, first dropping blobs of butter into the moat and watching them melt, followed by a generous amount of maple syrup. Then sprinkle with a generous amount of sugar and add a dash of milk to cool it down just a tad. Yummy!

My father, being the youngest of nine children, was forced to be creative. There was no money for toys for nine kids, so they either spent their days roaming around the farm, doing crazy things, like sticking their arms into beehives to catch queen bees, while the siblings helped themselves to honey, or found ways to make their own toys. He had shown me how to make a 'steamroller' using a wooden cotton reel, a lollipop stick and a rubber band. I had once decided to see if my 'steamroller' would be able to make its way through my plate of oats. It had, catapulting oats all over the table as the elastic band unwound. Mother was not pleased.

"We won't be back for lunch today, Rosemary," I announced.

"No problem. Will you be back for dinner?"

"Yes, definitely. We're not going too far today, just going up to *God's Window* and the potholes. Let's hope the weather plays along. I would like to take a few photos."

"Yes, let's hope so. You can get four seasons in one day here."

We headed out. We had only five tapes in the car, so I had tuned the radio into Radio Highveld, and we were now listening to '*She Drives Me Crazy*' by the Fine Young Cannibals, a song which always reminded of Jackie for some reason. As we drove along the R533, I noticed that it was a beautiful sunny day.

God's Window sits within the boundaries of *The Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve*, which is along the escarpment section of the *Drakensberg Range*, the same mountain range we had hiked in on DAY ONE of our trip. *The Blyde River Canyon* itself, was a 26 km long 'green' canyon, as opposed to other famous South African canyons, such as the *Fish River Canyon*, the second largest in the world. It was covered by subtropical vegetation and formed part of the *Panoramic Route*, along with the *Three Rondavels*, *The Pinnacle*, *Bourke's Luck Potholes* and *God's Window*.

It is a popular tourist route and is usually included in a trip from Johannesburg to the *Kruger National Park*, which you could see from *God's Window* on a clear day. Situated in the southern part of the nature reserve, its vantage point afforded a panoramic view of the Lowveld expanse, some 700 metres below the sheer plunging cliffs. Combined with the escarpment forests, this Eden-like vista had prompted the name *God's Window*. On a clear day, you could even see right across the *Kruger National Park* and see the *Lebombo Mountains*, which were on the border of Mozambique.

Today was, thankfully, one of those days. In the 1980 cult film, *The God's Must Be Crazy*, there is a scene near the end of the movie when Xi, the Bushman, arrives at *God's Window* on a day with low-lying cloud cover, which leads him to believe that this was the end of Earth.

Apart from being a good place for a photo-op, there is nothing else to do there, so after going through a whole roll of film, I put away my camera and we continued on our merry way.

Our next stop was the *Bourke's Luck* potholes, named after prospector Bernard Thomas (Tom) Bourke and situated at the confluence of the Blyde and Treur Rivers. Sustained underwater vortexes, have, over the millennia, eroded a number of cylindrical potholes. We parked in the visitors' parking and slowly criss-crossed the various pedestrian bridges, wondering at how the forces of nature always found a way to create amazingly beautiful sights. I put a new roll of film into my cheap 35mm camera. It was soon finished, but I resisted the temptation to refill, wanting to keep my last two rolls for the rest of the trip. Rather have something you don't use than need something you don't have.

Rock hyrax pellets littered the rocky trail. The rock hyrax (commonly called *dassie* in South Africa) can be found at sea level and all the way up to an elevation of 4000 metres – quite a range. It is a medium-sized mammal, and, surprisingly, the closest relative to the majestic elephant, although, unlike its much larger cousin, prefers to live in rock crevices. Can you imagine the annual family reunion? The elephant kids would suck at hide-and-seek.

Hyraxes look like squat, heavy-set squirrels – minus the big fluffy tail – and can grow up to 50cm and weigh between 4 and 5kg. They have no toilet training and seem to spend most of their lives eating and excreting. Sadly, tourists feed them, and a couple of dassies were following us, hoping for some titbits. It is difficult to resist feeding animals.

In the centre of Durban, next to the city hall, there is a small park filled with hundreds of pigeons. They spend all day redecorating the heads and shoulders of the war memorial statues and getting fed by passers-by, who buy packets of corn seed from the several vendors in the park.

Maybe it was because my first cat, Pussyfoots, had killed many a pigeon, but I always felt sorry for the pigeons, and would feed them whenever I could. As I grew older, I became more observant and noticed that the birds were not so good at avoiding cars. The surrounding streets were strewn with pigeon roadkill. The pigeons had become too fat and lazy to fly. They waddled desperately between cars, hoping not to get squashed, usually unsuccessfully. All animals are the same – including the human species. Once you get fat and lazy – you are doomed.

So, ignoring the begging *dassies*, and having already completed our itinerary for the day, I suggested to Jackie that we have lunch at the very touristy restaurant located next to the car park. It seemed convenient.

"I hate tourists," she responded.

"You are one," I replied.

“True, but I don’t really feel like eating there. It’s too crowded and there are far too many noisy kids.” Being a kindergarten teacher, she spent the majority of her time with noisy kids and believed that “one should not bring one’s work home with you.”

I almost rolled my eyes and sighed, but caught myself in time, before she aimed one of her mace-like fists at me.

“Ok, let’s go to London,” I said smiling.

“Funny chap. That’s possibly the most puerile thing you have ever said. I’m serious, I don’t want to eat here.”

“I’m serious too, my buttercup,” I said, full of loving sarcasm. We had passed through the dorp of London a few kilometres before the potholes, but Jackie had been in her normal reclined position, listening to a Madonna tape:

“When you call my name – it’s like a little prayer – I’m down on my knees – I wanna take you there...” she had been singing along. She was not going to win any Grammy Awards, but it was nice to see her in a good mood – besides, she put up with my rhino-mating ritual whenever we were on the dance floor together. The least I could do was grin and bear it.

“We passed through a little London town on our way here. It’s just a few minutes away. You probably missed it while you were doing your Madonna impersonation.”

She laughed. “Oh, really? Ok, let’s go have a look. If there’s nothing there, we can just carry on until we find a place.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Come, let’s go.”

London was a no-horse town. If it wasn’t for the road sign, you would never it was a town. We continued to Graskop, which we had passed through earlier that morning, it being the only eating choice for tourists in the vicinity. There were a few sidewalk cafes specialising in snacks and drinks. Or tea and scones, if you preferred. I wanted to choose the busiest one, believing, as I do, that it is a sign that it has a good reputation. No GOOGLE reviews in those days. Jackie, of course, had other ideas.

“No, my love,” dripping with sarcasm, “we are not going to *that* one. I’m sure they are all much of a muchness.”

Now I *did* roll my eyes, careful not to let Jackie see. I parked in front of a café. A few families were seated at wooden tables, which were covered in red and white chequered tablecloths. Jackie chose the table that was furthest from the other people. They had kids.

Not really being that hungry, I ordered a plate of chips and a Black Label beer. Jackie, probably deciding that she had eaten far too many dead animals lately, opted for a French salad. And rooibos.

Our waitress, a very young, chatty Afrikaans girl, took our order as she wiped the table down, and then asked ⁶“Waarvandaan kom jy?”

‘Engels,’ I said, pointing to my chest.

“Oh, jammer, I mean sorry,” she stammered. “Where do you come from?”, in a thick Afrikaans accent.

She was more than likely waitressing during her school holidays and was trying to butter me up for a big tip. “Durban,” I replied.

“Oh, that’s nice. I’ve never been to Durban. I want to see the sea one day.” It was always strange to me that there were people in the world that had never seen the sea. I took it for granted. I was a beach bum through and through. In our family photo album, there was a picture of me on the beach as a baby, probably not more than 6 months old. But was it really that strange? There were a multitude of places in South Africa that I had never been to.

“I’m sure you will,” I said encouragingly.

“Did you just come from the potholes?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Have you been to the *Mac Mac Falls* yet?”

“No, are they close?”

“Ja. Just down the road. I think maybe 15 kilometres down that way,” she said, pointing in the direction we were heading.

“Really? I don’t remember going past any waterfall on the way here.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“Just outside Pilgrim’s Rest.”

Oh, ja – I see. You’ll have to get onto the other road. If you head towards Pilgrims, you should see a turn-off - I think it is the R532. I’m not sure if there is a sign for *Mac Mac*. There should be.”

“Oh, Ok. Thanks very much.”

Before we were able to stand up, she hurriedly asked “And have you been to *The Pinnacle*?”

“No. Where’s that?”

“You must have passed it on your way here if you have just come from the potholes. If you head back that way, the turn-off will be on your right.”

“Is it worth seeing?”

⁶ “Where do you come from?”

She laughed. "Well, it's really just a long, thin rock."

"Worth a photo?"

"A lot of tourists stop there for photos, but it's nothing special."

I looked at Jackie. She shrugged. "We have time to kill."

"Thanks for the info. We'll go take a look," I said rising, placing a R10 note on the table.

"You're welcome." she said, pocketing the note quickly. "Thank you for the tip. Enjoy the rest of your day."

The Pinnacle was easy to find. According to the information board at the parking lot, it was a 30-metre-high quartzite tower. We walked onto the viewing platform and saw an impressive needle of rock projecting from the canyon floor, surrounded by wild, natural vegetation, definitely worthy of a photo. An added bonus was the small waterfall which cascaded from one of the cliffs. I inserted my second-last roll of film and snapped away. It reminded me of *Cappadocia*, a place I hadn't been to, but which I had seen in various travel ads. Except this one had no family. He (she) was all alone. Poor thing.

"Ready to move on?" I asked Jackie.

"Yes, let's go to *Mac Mac*."

Once in the car, I quickly consulted my trusty map.

"OK. We need to get back to Graskop, then turn onto the R533 towards Pilgrims, and then take a left turn onto the R532."

By saying it out aloud, I was not only reinforcing – I was also laying the foundation for shared blame, should anything go wrong. It didn't. Once again, we found ourselves in a dusty parking lot, reading the information board.

MAC MAC FALLS

Height: 65 metres

River: Mac Mac River

Designation: National Monument

'The Mac Mac Falls was originally a single stream. Gold miners, in an attempt to work the rich, gold-bearing reef over which it plunges, blasted it with dynamite.'

The viewing platform was crowded, and Jackie was hesitant to join the throng, but finally decided that there was no point in coming all this way for nothing, braving the melee for just a minute. It wasn't a mind-blowing vista, but I took some snaps, nevertheless. I was surprised to see that they had restrooms there. There was even a small kiosk selling ice cream, cold

drinks, sweets and chips – definitely a no-go area for child-allergic Jackie. The whole one side of the parking lot was occupied by twenty or so curio sellers, sitting patiently for tourists to buy a trinket or two. Plastic sheets were strewn across that whole section, in a futile attempt to keep dust off their wares. They had arranged the curios from smallest to largest. In front, were the tiny wood-carved animals, followed by more animals, made from wire. And so, it went – small clay pots, bigger carvings, bigger clay pots, bigger wire animals – and right at the back were huge woven baskets and even bigger clay pots. I could not picture any family-filled tourist car being either willing or able to accommodate such bulk, so there must have been some demand for them locally.

I saw a detailed wire rhino for R5.00. Tempting. It seemed one hell of a bargain, considering how much work went into making it. Up until now, we had not had a chance to buy any mementoes of our honeymoon. Jackie, equally impressed by the well-crafted wire animals, beat me to the punch. She took a R5 note out of her purse and picked up a red and silver ladybug. She handed the note to the grateful vendor.

“This will look great in my garden. It’s soooo PRETTY!”

She tended to refer to the garden as *my* garden, or *her* garden. I suppose it was. She was the garden expert. I was merely the labour. But I felt I had done enough for *her* garden to warrant at least an ‘*our*’ garden. I had sweated in the cruel midsummer sun, moving tons of soil in *my* wheelbarrow in order to make her landscaping vision a reality. I had obediently built her a fishpond replete with a rock feature and a waterfall, and, when the resident kingfishers had eaten all her fish, had successfully protected her next batch of fish with an ingenious netting system. I had dug her vegetable garden for her, installed irrigation, supplied a new lawnmower, bought a complete set of gardening tools and hundreds of packets of seeds. I deserved some recognition. Our garden was bigger than most and it had taken weeks to clear it of the overgrown jungle that greeted us when we had moved in.

It had taken *us* a year to establish a proper garden, which had included many local varieties, including hibiscus, African carnations, river lilies, ice plants, morning glories, gladiolus and more. We were also fortunate to live in a birder’s paradise. We were near a river, so we not only had our own local breeding pair of Fish Eagles, we also had three types of crane, blue swallows, bearded vultures, storks, woodpeckers, trumpeter hornbills, and many more magnificent species. We even had our own Burchell’s coucal, which clumsily hopped from bush to bush.

Jackie was very proud of *her* garden. I smiled to myself as I remembered the one weekend a pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses had dared to come to our gate. Jackie, who was gardening at the time, walked calmly to the gate, greeted them warmly and opened the gate for them. I had been pottering about inside the house, but the double-doors to the veranda were open, and I could see her from the living-room.

I watched, curiously, as she gracefully shepherded them on a circuit around *her* garden, reciting the name of every variety of flower as she passed. It was poetry in motion. The guests, too polite to interrupt her tour, were probably expecting to be offered tea at some stage,

allowing them to give their 'pitch'. It was not to be. Before they realised it, they were back at the gate.

"Thanks for stopping by. Have a nice day."

It was thing of beauty.

Jackie was chuffed with her ladybug. "Do you know," she started, reminding me of the old CHAPIES bubble-gum wrappers (*Did you know that the cheetah is the fastest land mammal?*), "that ladybugs symbolise fortune and good luck?"

"Really?" I replied, faking surprise. "Let's get out of here," I suggested.

"Too many people," she agreed. "Do you mind if I just relax this afternoon? I want to climb into bed and read."

"That's fine. We've seen everything there is to see around here."

Rosemary was in the garden we when arrived back at *Country Cottage*. The women started talking about all things gardening and Jackie's reading got derailed. I retired to the room. I was regretting not having bought a book with me. I found Jackie's stash of books in her carry bag. The only one that I thought I might enjoy was Terry Pratchett's '*Mort*'. It was number four in the *Discworld* series, none of which I had read. I took my shoes off, got under the duvet and began to read. It was all about *Death*.

I was drowning. I couldn't breathe. I tried desperately to swim up to the surface, unable to do so as invisible currents grabbed hold of me and swept me, tumbling down into the abyss. My lungs were burning. I felt consciousness slipping away. I was doomed. I jerked violently awake, still unable to breathe.

"What is happening to me!" my mind screamed. My eyes focused. Jackie was looking down at me from above – her fingers gripping my nose.

I knocked her hand away violently. "What the fuck! You could have killed me! Are you crazy!"

"Relax. It was only for a few seconds."

"Why would you do that!?"

"It's almost dinner time. Time to wake up."

"A gentle kiss on the cheek would have worked."

"I tried that. You were dead to the world."

Breathing heavily, I was now taking deep breaths to try calm down. Innnnn...out...innnn....out...

“Please don’t ever do that again,” I said, still not amused.

“Yes dear.”

I glanced at my watch – 6pm.

“I fell asleep trying to read your Terry Pratchett book.”

“I saw that. It was on the floor when I came in. I put it on the chair.”

“Ok, thanks, but I doubt I’m going to give it another go. It’s all about death.”

My favourite author was Wilbur Smith. I had read every book he had ever written, starting with the first one, *When the Lion Feeds*. I only became interested in books when I was about 9 years old. It was good timing as it turned out, because the book, although written in 1964, had been banned in South Africa for many years. It was one of the first books I had ever read. I had recently purchased his latest book, *Golden Fox*, which is part of the *Courtney* series. The plot was a little bit too convoluted for me, but I was determined to finish it anyway. Next week.

Supper was again dominated by meat, Rosemary having made *bobotie*, a traditional Cape Malay dish which should never be attempted by novices. She was obviously no novice. It was perfect.

“it’s a pity you are leaving tomorrow. It’s braai day, said JP.

“Yes, it *is* a pity. I love a good braai.”

“Have you ever had a **bad** braai,” he joked, playing with words.

“*Touché*,” I laughed. “I’ll rephrase that. I **love** a braai. Period.”

“Maybe next time,” he consoled.

“Yes. Maybe next time.”

Seeing that JP was not working the next day, he opened a bottle of 10-year-old KWV brandy. Top shelf.

Jackie didn’t drink spirits, so the ladies enjoyed some Pinotage, while the men made a big dent in the brandy. After discussing the medicinal properties of brandy, the difficulties of farming and whether or not FW De Klerk would unban the ANC or not, the topic switched to rugby. Rugby was more than our national sport – it was almost a religion.

“Congratulations on Natal winning the Currie Cup,” said JP.

“Thanks man,” I replied, feeling good about the acknowledgement.

“Let’s hope it is the first of many.” I personally had nothing to do with them winning their **first** Currie Cup, but loyal sports fans around the world, regardless of the sport, rode the emotional rollercoaster that was part of being a supporter.

Durban has a very big Indian population. Indians descended from the Indian indentured labourers that were brought to Natal in the late 1800s to work on the sugar cane plantations. The greater Durban area cuisine had subsequently become heavily influenced by the growing population of Indians, and curry became synonymous with Durban. Which sometimes led to confusion. There were still people in South Africa who automatically assumed that it was the *Curry Cup* – and not the *Currie Cup*.

Back in 1891, Sir Donald Currie, owner of the *Union-Castle Lines*, had given the touring British Isles rugby team a gold trophy to present to whichever opposition team showed the most spirit. The visitors won all 3 of their matches, but it was decided that Griqualand-West had been their fiercest opposition and they were awarded the trophy. They then handed the trophy to the South African Rugby Board, and it became the floating trophy for the Currie Cup competition. The inaugural tournament was held in 1892, and it had taken, my team, Natal, almost 100 years to win it for the first time. They would go on to win it another seven times in the next 30 years.

It had been 18 years since JP's team, Transvaal, had won the Currie Cup.

"Transvaal have had a long drought," he lamented.

(Little did he know that they would appear in the next three Currie Cup finals, eventually winning it in 1993.)

Jackie gave me that "You've had enough to drink" look and I received the message – loud and clear. "OK, bedtime for me," I announced, taking the lead.

"Me too," said Jackie. "It was a wonderful night. Thank you so much."

"Pleasure. Goodnight. Sleep well. See you at breakfast."

"Yes, about that. We will be down early for breakfast. Tomorrow is a driving day. I was thinking of eating at about 8am. Is that too early for a Sunday?"

"No problem at all. This is a B&B. You are the boss," she smiled. "See you at eight."

"Great. Goodnight."

DAY SIX. Tick. ✓

Chapter Seven – It’s Just A Jump To The Left

Normally, I didn’t use alarms. It was not an ideal way to wake up, but wanting to stay on schedule, I set my watch alarm for 7am. It was a much gentler sound than an alarm clock – not the sort of deafening shrill sound that some alarms make. I managed to wake up before the alarm went off, using the extra few minutes to do my ablutions. It was tricky having two people in the bathroom at once. We had been together long enough to have adjusted our routines so that we managed to avoid being in the bathroom together. Waking Jackie, I consulted the map while she got ready.

Having packed and taken the luggage to the car, we were ready for our farewell breakfast. It was copy and paste of the day before, but we had no problems with that. Rosemary made excellent food. Our tummies full, we said our goodbyes and set off for Sabie. We were destined to overnight at Middelburg that night. It was a town I despised, because I had spent a few months at the army base there during my military service. I had chosen it because it was a fairly big town, with a bigger selection of places to stay. It was also far enough along the road to Sun City. I *could* have driven all the way to Pretoria, but I was of the opinion that you stayed away from cities during a honeymoon. Unless it was Paris, of course.

It was only a 40-minute drive down the R533 to Sabie, the name of the town originating from the siSwati word *ulusaba* (fearful river), because the river was once teeming with the dangerous Nile Crocodile. Some were still to be found in the local rivers, dams and streams. Even in present-day South Africa, crocodile attacks are quite common. One study stated that there were 214 attacks on humans during the last 38 years, and some attacks went unreported, so one could only guess the actual number.

Like many of the surrounding towns, Sabie had been originally established after gold had been discovered there. Forestry is now the main industry in the area, and the forests in the surrounding area are some of the largest man-made forests in the world. The town itself, relies heavily on year-round tourism to keep the community economy going, and attracts a lot of adventure-seekers, such as mountain-bikers, canoeists and 4x4 enthusiasts. For the less adventurous, it is a popular fly-fishing area – as long as you have a permit.

Sabie had been an impulse addition to my itinerary, and I wasn’t sure if it was a necessary one. Scenic waterfalls were common in the vicinity, but we had already seen two waterfalls just the day before. That seemed an adequate number for me. I racked my brain, trying to think of something to do, and in the end gave up and decided that one more waterfall wouldn’t hurt. Jackie, having looked at our waterfall options had settled on *Lone Creek Falls*, which involved a 18km detour on the *Ou Lydenburg Road*.

“What the heck. We’re on holiday,” she had rationalised when I told her it was not on our route. She was in a good mood. She had decided that somehow Sunday was a good day to play her *Rocky Horror Picture Show* soundtrack full blast. Lying in her usual reclined position, she was singing along to the *Time Warp* lyrics.

“It’s just a JUMP to the left – and then a step to the RIGH-AI-AI-T – with your hands on your hips – you bring your knees in TIGH-AI-AI-T!”

Infectious. I joined in, receiving a nod of approval from Jackie. We were terrible. We would have battled to audition for the *cats’ choir* – but we were certainly enthusiastic. *Rocky Horror*, as it is commonly referred to, is possibly the biggest cult movie of all time, and we had both grown up listening to it. We fortunately both had the same taste in music and had amassed a quite substantial CD and tape collection.

My map did not fail me, and we arrived in the surprisingly deserted waterfall parking lot.

“Wonderful! I guess the other tourists are enjoying a lazy Sunday morning,” I thought, pleased that we had the place to ourselves. Unlike the previous two waterfalls, we had seen the day before, *Lone Creek Falls* parking lot was situated at the bottom of the falls. We walked over to the tourist information board. There wasn’t much information.

LONE CREEK WATERFALL

Height *70 metres*

As I craned my neck to take in the whole of the falls, it occurred to me that it was better to view waterfalls from the bottom upwards. It gave you a better sense of scale. *Mac Mac Falls* was almost the same height as *Lone Creek* but had seemed much smaller in comparison when viewed from above. I limited myself to three photos. Part of me, forever the opportunist, was considering the possibility of skinny-dipping in the creek with Jackie. It would not be our first time. Like me, she got a kick out of having sex in public places. Then I remembered the crocodiles!

We had decided against an early lunch, so we drove back into Sabie, found the R536, and drove towards *White River*, more commonly called *Witrivier*, being an Afrikaans area.

We got there half an hour later. It is a small town, with a permanent population of less than 20 000, but considered a big town for the area. We had now almost completed a circular route from Nelspruit, where we had been a few days earlier, and were just a short drive north of it, and I realised that it might have been easier to have gone via *White River*, *Sabie*, *Pilgrim’s Rest* and then *Bambi*, instead of going the arse-about-face way. Too late.

Our loop had kept us within the farming district, so the countryside was much the same, with many farms, each growing a variety of either fruit, tobacco or cereals, such as wheat, maize and barley. Every so often, we would pass a field of sunflowers, and, giving in to pressure from Jackie, I finally stopped for her to pick (steal) some. Often, when stopping for a pee, she would pick a handful of wild roadside flowers and they would eventually wither and die and be thrown away weeks later.

On one very long road trip we had taken to Cape Town, she had gone mad and bought almost the entire stock of dried wildflowers from a roadside vendor somewhere in the Karoo. Thankfully, it was on the return trip.

Lord Alfred Milner, the British administrator of Transvaal, had, in 1905, demarcated land along the nearby *Emanzimhlope River* for settlement by British settlers, almost all of them demobilised soldiers who had recently fought in *The Second Anglo-Boer War*. They were initially provided with farming equipment and given a weekly salary, until they became self-sufficient from selling their crops. Despite two years of subsidies and the construction of a 25km-long irrigation canal, only a handful were successful. In 1911, a large syndicate bought most of the farms from the new Union government and founded a large-scale citrus farming project. Later, during apartheid, WHITE River was designated a WHITE area, and many of the black tribes and communities were forcibly resettled in other areas.

White River is the sort of place you only stop for lunch and go to the bathroom. There is nothing else to see or do. The main street has the obligatory post office, church, bank and liquor store, but being Sunday, all of these were closed, and it resembled a ghost town. As we drove down the main street, we came to a section of the road lined with a couple restaurants. Not many families were enjoying the sunny weather, and we saw only two families that were seated on wooden picnic tables in the outdoor sections of the restaurants. We cruised past slowly as if about to do a drive-by massacre. On the same side of the street as the restaurants, was a sign: LAZY LEOPARD CURIO SHOP.

“Do you mind if I have a look inside”, I asked, but was already pulling into the vacant parking space in front.

“I’m also keen to see what they have, but we must promise to stop each other from buying anything above R10.”

“Deal.”

As we entered, I noticed that the small shopfront belied the fact that it was a deceptively big curio shop. Many of the curios were the same ones available at the roadside stalls and were no doubt on consignment. But there were also larger items, mainly beautiful carved animals made from various types of hardwood – including the BIG FIVE – lion, leopard, cape buffalo, rhino and elephant, categorised as the five most difficult African mammal species to hunt.

Prominently displayed in the centre of the shop, was a life-size carving of a warrior from an undetermined tribe – but possibly meant to represent a Zulu or Swazi warrior – leaning back on one foot, poised to throw a spear, arm drawn back like a javelin thrower. The wood polish gave him a realistic glow, as if his body was covered in a sheen of sweat, but the real leopard skin loincloth, along with matching head, wrist and anklet accessories, brought him to life - like in a scene from *Night at the Museum*. It was an incredible display of craftsmanship. I looked at the price tag - \$4000. Ouch!

Tour operators that specialised in the Kruger National Park and surrounding areas, made a compulsory stop in White River specifically to shop at LAZY LEOPARD. South Africa, sometimes referred to as ‘the world in one country’, is a popular tourist destination, with Cape Town and Kruger being the most visited tourist destinations. The tourism segment of the economy generated about 750 000 direct jobs – and double that number indirectly – a vital part of the economy.

Tour guides did not generally make a lot of money – it was more of a lifestyle choice – although there were some that found it was the only available means of supporting their families. These were mostly the non-white guides who did not have the qualifications to be National Guides and were more suited to showing people around specific local attractions. Either way, all extra income was welcome. Standard operating procedure for the tour guides is to get 10% of anything a tourist spent, so **every** tour guide in the Kruger Park area included a compulsory stop at curio shops such as the LAZY LEOPARD, never stopping at roadside stalls.

The local communities had protested that it was unfair to them, as they were not able to compete, so the big curio shops agreed to stock their handicrafts on consignment until they were sold. With the shop prices being much higher than the roadside prices, this was a welcome revenue stream for the local crafters. Not as nice as the \$400 commission that some tour guide would be paid out once the warrior carving was sold, but better than nothing.

Jackie had gone wandering off and I spotted her looking very close to breaking her R10 budget, as she fingered a beaded bracelet. She loved bracelets. Both her arms were adorned with many types of bracelets, preventing her from ever stealthily sneaking up on someone. A memory popped into my head. One day whilst on holiday in Cape Town, we were walking down from Oranjezicht suburb down to the Gardens, when a Cape Coloured approached us, holding a long broomstick, on which there was a collection of ‘gold’ bangles. Jackie’s eyes had nearly popped out of head in excitement.

⁷“Spesiaale prys vir jou madem, net twintig rand elk.”

She looked at me. I had my suspicions about the authenticity of the ‘gold’ but, fuck it. “Choose four,” I said.

As excited as a kid in a candy shop, she quickly chose her four and handed them to the hawker, who placed them into a plastic bag. I paid and we continued on our way. A month later, she had arrived back from school in a foul mood.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, concerned.

Holding her arm up, she pointed to the green marks all along her arm. I knew what was coming.

“Those were not gold bracelets!! The fucker ripped me off!”

Trying to keep a serious face, I stood up and gave her a hug.

“It’s OK my love. I’ll give you my AMERICAN SWISS card and you can go choose some the next time we are at the mall.”

I had been waiting for this moment. From the moment I had seen that bracelet hawker, I knew that this was going to be a double whammy for my finances.

⁷ “Special price for you madam. Only R20.”

Not wanting to disturb Jackie's browsing, I slowly walked through the shop, stopping every now and again to admire the craftsmanship of some or other curio. I glanced up at the wall in front of me and saw that there were about twenty masks hanging there. African tribal masks. I smiled.

There was NO culture or tradition of tribal masks in southern Africa. I guess it wasn't really a scam as such, but rather a case of 'don't ask – don't tell.' There were surprisingly few areas of Africa that had a history with masks. Only Equatorial Africa (mainly Gabon, Cameroon, Congo and parts of southern Nigeria), West Africa (Mali, and from Sierra Leone to the Ivory Coast) and the Makonde tribe in East Africa, who lived on the border of Mozambique and Tanzania had a history of mask-making. I doubted that it was common knowledge. Not my problem.

I sauntered up to where Jackie was still contemplating buying an overpriced bracelet.

"Please tell me you aren't going to buy it," I said softly.

"No dear. Come. Let's go."

"What shall we do now?" she asked as we stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"I could eat. You?"

"Yes. I am a bit peckish. We can leave the car here and just take a walk down to that café over there," pointing as she said it.

I followed her finger and saw the café. The restaurant was set back from the road, by about 6 metres, and I thought it might possibly have been a house at one stage and that the grass area where the tables were had probably been the front lawn. The waitress seated us at a white wrought-iron table which wobbled as I leaned my elbows on it. We were protected by the midday sun by a large, blue and white beach-type umbrella advertising WALLS ICE CREAM, its pole slotted into the central 'pole hole'.

There was another family sitting nearby, and Jackie was looking distastefully at the noisy kids who were whining about the fact that they were not allowed to have milkshakes before they ate their food.

"I'm sure they'll be leaving soon," I said pre-empting the inevitable request from Jackie to go eat elsewhere. She scowled.

"Why don't we just order our food to go and then go eat in the car," I suggested, not wanting an argument. We did, with me ordering a packet of *slap* chips with extra vinegar - and Jackie ordering a chicken burger with extra tomato.

Five minutes later, we had our order. We paid and went back to the car.

"There doesn't look like there's much to do around here," she mumbled, mouth full of burger.

"It seems that way," I agreed, taking the map out with my greasy fingers. I could see nothing of interest anywhere near White River and was just about to resign myself to the fact that

there was no option but to head towards Middelburg, when I noticed what looked like the Greek letter omega, near the dorp of Dollaaskraal. “That looks familiar.”

I was mentally scrolling through my brain trying to remember my high geography lessons. “It’s not ringing any bells,” I was thinking, “*Where is Quasimodo when you need him?*”

Then, in a flash of inspiration, I checked the map KEY.

And there it was: SUDWALA CAVES. “Of course – omega looks like a cave,” I remembered.

“How about *Sudwala Caves*,” I now suggested to Jackie, feeling proud of myself for finding the caves.

“Where’s that?”

I was hesitant to bring up the past but answered anyway “Remember Dollaaskraal?”

She turned and looked at me her hamster-like cheeks stuffed with burger.

“Wheh we ga losht?”

“Yes. The caves are there.”

Not having had the benefit of consulting the map on a daily basis, Jackie looked confused. She took a quick swallow and said,

“We left there three days ago. How can we still be close to Dollaaskraal?”

“Well, we are not THAT close, but they are in the direction that we are heading. I’ll show you on the map,” and held the map between us, tracing the route with my finger.

“Less than an hour. If we spend an hour at the caves, max, and then go to our accommodation in Middelburg, we will get there before dark.”

“How long will it take to get to Middleburg if we skip the caves?”

“About two hours fifteen minutes,” I replied.

“What time is it now?” she asked.

“Twelve thirty.”

“A part of me just wants to go straight to Middelburg, but, if you promise not to get lost **again**, we can go to the caves.”

I knew she was trying to be reasonable, despite not really wanting to go visit the caves, so I said, “Look. I’ve been to the caves before, so I don’t mind if we skip them.”

I paused, waiting for a response, then quickly continued, “They are quite spectacular though. They also happen to be the oldest known caves in the world,” I added.

That seemed to convince her.

“Really? Ok, let’s go. But maximum one hour. We must check in before dark.”

“OK.”

With my *slap* chips between my thighs, I drove to the R537 turn off. The route was a bit tricky – R537-R37-R539 – and required my full attention. I set my focus to LASER BEAM mode, and we arrived at the caves less than an hour later, passing the bullet-riddled DOLLAASKRAAL sign just before. I smiled when I saw it. What a night that had been!

There weren’t too many cars in the dusty parking lot. We paid our R10 entrance fee and, tickets in hand, went ahead up the terraced pathway towards the cave entrance, where a security guard checked our tickets before allowing us to enter through the turnstile. Leaving the daylight behind us, we found ourselves in a short passage – the almost tunnel-like opening of the caves. There was no lighting in the tunnel itself and was illuminated by the dim light of the cavern beyond. But a light at the end of a tunnel is always welcome – no matter how faint it is.

As we entered the first cavern Jackie’s face lit up. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “This is amazing!”

Resisting the urge to say, “I told you so,” I grabbed her hand and led her further into the cavern. The cavern was huge, with ceilings so high you couldn’t see them in the subtle light. Strategically lit stalactites hung threateningly from the roof, like the teeth of a prehistoric dinosaur. We were dwarfed by the scale of the cave. Humans were really so insignificant in the greater scheme of things. This was just a cave. The infinite universe was, by definition, infinitely bigger.

“We’re just arrogant, talking animals,” I was thinking. *“We spend so much of our lives stressing about trivia. I sometimes wish I was a cat.”*

I was glad that Jackie was enjoying *Sudwala Caves*, but a little surprised by the level of her enthusiasm. This was not the first cave we had visited. Two years earlier, we had visited the more-famous *Cango Caves* outside of Oudtshoorn in South Africa. Being just off the famous coastal *Garden Route*, they received hundreds of thousand visitors annually, and had the infrastructure to cater for big groups. The *Cango Caves* were deeper than *Sudwala*, and had more to offer, but the crowds spoiled it. It was just too busy and too touristy.

The teacher inside me wanted to rattle off all the statistics that I quickly read on the information board at the entrance, but I kept quiet, letting Jackie absorb the beauty in silence.

The *Sudwala Caves* are estimated to be around 240 million years old and are set in Precambrian dolomite, which was first laid down almost 3000 million years ago. A number of ⁸speleothem structures are to be found in the cave, some with interesting names like ‘Lowveld Rocket’, ‘Samson’s Pillar’ and ‘Screaming Monster’, and these peculiar shapes were

⁸ A structure formed in a cave by the deposition of minerals from water, e.g. – stalactite or stalagmite

surprisingly aesthetically pleasing, helped by the kaleidoscope of colours they were bathed in.

They also had a rich history, playing an important role in more recent events. Somquba, brother of the Swazi heir apparent, had used it as a fortress during a power struggle for the Swazi throne, with many a bloody battle being fought at the cave entrance. The principal guardian of the caves' entrance was Sudwala, Somquba's chief ⁹*induna*, and when Somquba was killed, he had taken charge of the settlement of surviving clan members residing in the caves, which bear his name today.

Not too long afterwards, during *The Second Boer War*, the caves were used by the Boers to store ammunition, particularly the shells used by their *Long Toms*. At one time, it was thought that the caves had been used to store the legendary ¹⁰*Kruger Millions*' gold bullion, which reputedly disappeared somewhere between Waterval Onder and Nelspruit during Paul Kruger's flight from Pretoria to Lourenco Marques (now Maputo).

Jackie and I, still lovingly holding hands, had almost completed our tour of the caves. The Cango Caves had been much brighter, with the hidden lights being yellows, oranges and reds, but I preferred the predominantly blue lighting used in Sudwala. They gave the caves a spooky, supernatural atmosphere, which I personally thought was more suited to caves than bright lights.

Jackie was not the type to do group tours, so we had not paid for the guided tour and were doing our own thing. The caves were like an echo chamber though, and, unless you whispered, everyone in the cave could hear what you were saying. There was a small, guided group just ahead of us, and I overheard the guide say that it was thought that the caves had been occupied during the prehistoric era, due to their size and the mysterious supply of fresh air which flowed through the caves, the source of which had not been found to this day.

I was keeping a close eye on the time, and, even at our leisurely pace, we managed to complete our tour in just 45 minutes. Sudwala Caves, Tick. ✓

It was now just a matter of getting to our B&B. The fastest way was via the R539 and onto the N4 highway, which I found without any hiccups. The speed limit on South African highways is 120 km/h – the perfect cruising speed. Not as fast as the *autobahn* in Germany, but a higher speed limit than a most countries. It had been almost a week since I had been able to put my foot down and I was grateful that this last stretch to Middelburg afforded me the opportunity to do so. Jackie was fiddling with the tuner on the car radio and suddenly instructions to *Pump up the jam!* came blasting out the speakers as she found Radio Jacaranda.

“Too loud!” I shouted above the cacophony.

⁹ Councillor/captain.

¹⁰ The Kruger Millions is a hoard of gold reputed to have been hidden in South Africa by or on behalf of President Paul Kruger to avoid it being captured by the British during the Second Boer War.

“This song has to be played loudly!” she countered.

“I need to focus on the road. Please turn it down. It distracts me.”

Sighing, she adjusted the volume and resumed her supine position, uncharacteristically ‘raising the ceiling’ with her hands as she pumped the jam upwards. She loved dancing – borne out by fact that she loved it so much she would even join *me* on the dance floor – and was probably frustrated that she had been cooped up in the car every day, unable to express herself properly as she played all her favourite songs. Her foot was tapping on the dashboard, and she was singing along to the lyrics.

“Happy wife – happy life,” I thought, and concentrated on the road once more.

We arrived in Middelburg before dark, and I could feel my mood change. I had hated the few months I had spent here during my military service. “What was I thinking?” I berated myself. “I should have booked a place in Witbank.” After a few seconds, “Nooo, maybe not.”

Witbank was the only other main town on the road to Pretoria, but it was not the sort of town you wanted to spend a night in. The military base I was stationed at in Middelburg never had a proper rugby field, so we used to go and train in Witbank. It was a rough place, full of lower-class yobbos. On one particular occasion, our *Defence Force* team was playing the local Witbank rugby club team and I was struck on the head by a flying Klipdrift brandy bottle. Luckily, it never broke, but by the end of the match (which we won), the field was littered with beer and brandy bottles. Rugby is a rough and tough sport, but the fisticuffs in the club pub that night had sorted out the men from the boys. Witbank was dropped from our fixture list, and a collective sigh of relief was sighed.

Distracted by my trip back into time, I had lost my focus and was now lost. Again. I confessed as much to Jackie and, before she could formulate a response, I pulled into a petrol garage and asked for directions. The petrol attendants had no clue where my destination was, so I told them to fill up the tank, check the oil and water, and I went inside to find the manager. He was a big Afrikaner – no surprise there – and very helpful.

“Ja. That place is new. It is actually on my way to work. Not too far from here. Turn left onto this road here,” he said, pointing through the big glass window, “carry on for maybe a kay, and it’s just off the corner of Joubert Street, on the left.”

Thanking him for his help, I returned to the car, paid the attendant, tipped him, and off we went, turning left onto the road. His directions were spot on, and we soon found ourselves outside the big, black iron gate of a very luxurious looking double-story building.

AMOUR GUEST HOUSE in shiny gold lettering along the 10-foot-high white-washed wall, assured me that this was the place. Unlike *COUNTRY COTTAGE*, which had been more of a homestay in a fancy house with spare bedrooms, *AMOUR GUEST HOUSE* was more like a boutique hotel, which was a relatively new concept. We had stayed at a similar sort of establishment in Cape Town, and, I must admit, it was a bit of shock to see one in Middleburg, of all places.

I pressed the intercom buzzer.

“Hello?”

“Hi. We have a booking. Mr. and Mrs. Smith.”

“Oh yes. Ok. I’ll buzz you in. Just drive up the driveway, go around the fountain and you will see the parking on your left. Then I’ll see you at reception. I’m Magda.”

The big heavy gates swung inwards, and I followed her instructions, and we got out the car.

It was a Mediterranean-style building, with balustrades on the veranda which ran along the top floor. The terracotta tiles and whitewashed walls completed the illusion. ‘Bed and breakfast’ were definitely a misnomer. I felt like royalty. Magda (pronounced Machh-da, with a Germanic ‘achh’) was a good-looking blonde of about 30.

“Good evening! Welcome to *Amour!*” she greeted us warmly.

“Good evening.”

We finished checking in and she asked us if we would like supper. “I need to add it to your bill, so if you are eating, please order now and you can pay in the morning. I won’t be on duty then, so it’s best I do it tonight to avoid any confusion.”

I was starving, so I said, “Yes, I would like supper please.”

“What about you dear?” turning to Jackie.

“Yes, that’ll be nice.”

“Ok. Excellent. Here’s a menu,” producing a menu from behind the desk.

I ordered a rump steak with chips and Jackie decided on the battered hake with chips. Poor hake.

“We don’t have a bellboy so I’m afraid you’ll have to take your bags up to your room yourselves if you don’t mind. What time would you like to eat?”

“As soon as possible,” blurted Jackie, quick on the draw.

The spacious room was tastefully decorated with a floral theme, much to Jackie’s delight. A king-sized bed, flanked by two antique side tables, lined one wall, and, against the opposite wall was a larger dresser next to a wide wardrobe, both antique, of course. Two plush armchairs and a large coffee table took centre spot, but the room was big enough to leave ample space for manoeuvring around the room without having to squeeze past any of the furniture. The armchairs, duvet and curtains had matching floral patterns and there were four framed watercolour paintings of flowers that completed the floral motif. One of the watercolours was of a bright pink cosmos, Jackie’s favourite wild flower. They were part of the sunflower family of plants, and we often stopped and picked them from the roadside when travelling through the countryside.

Magda knocked on our door. “Supper’s ready.”

Steak always tastes better with a bottle of wine, so I ordered a bottle of Shiraz, which Jackie and I shared, although I had three glasses to her one. I was now ready for bed. Returning to the room, I was soon asleep, leaving a happy Jackie to read her book.

DAY SEVEN. Tick. ✓

Chapter Eight – Sin City

Sun City, our final destination, was about 300km from Middelburg. I had told Jackie during supper, that I wanted to be on the road by 9am so that we would (hopefully) arrive at the hotel between 12 and 1pm. This was the standard check-in time and a perfect time to arrive, preventing us having to hang around waiting for housekeeping to get the room ready and also allowing us to maximise our time at the resort.

Our brief stay at AMOUR was enjoyable but I was happy to be heading out of Middelburg. It was a polluted dump. There were many coal-powered power stations in the area, which reduced both lung capacity and life expectancy. Our bellies full of buffet breakfast, we sped along the N4 towards Pretoria.

By 9.30, we were just outside the dorp of Bronkhorstspuit, which was almost the halfway mark to Pretoria. This side of the WITWATERSRAND was called EAST RAND, a heavily industrialised area, and the multitude of long silver smokestacks continuously pumping out pollution was a depressing sight. We weren't going into Pretoria itself, but it was necessary to go around it to get on the Rustenburg road which led to Sun City.

Pretoria was founded in 1855 by one of the leaders of the ¹¹*Voortrekkers*, Marthinus Pretorius, and he had named it after his famous father Andries Pretorius, who had become a celebrity amongst the Boers after the ¹²*Battle of Blood River*. It straddles the *Aapies (Monkeys) River* and was chosen as the capital of the ¹³*Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR)*. The abbreviation for the South African Rand is still ZAR (the ZA stands for Zuid Afrika and the R denotes the currency). Most historians see the founding of Pretoria as marking the end of the Boers' settlement movements of the *Great Trek*.

The Second Boer War resulted in the end of the Transvaal Republic, and, in 1910, the Union of South Africa united the inland Boer republics of the ZAR and the *Orange River Colony* with the coastal British colonies of Cape and Natal. Pretoria then became the administrative capital of the whole of South Africa, with Cape Town the legislative capital and Bloemfontein the judicial capital.

Before leaving, I had written down the rather complicated directions on a piece of paper which I had given to Jackie, asking her to kindly navigate. We were now trying to find the off ramp to the ring road.

"Keep left at the fork." I veered left.

"LEFT I said!"

¹¹ A northward migration of Dutch-speaking settlers from 1836 onwards, who travelled by wagon train from then Cape Colony into the interior of present-day South Africa in order to live beyond the Cape British colonial administration.

¹² It was a battle on the 16th of December 1838, between 464 Boer settlers and an estimated 10 000 to 15 000 Zulu warriors, after Dingane had broken his agreement with Piet Retief (who had been bludgeoned to death at the royal kraal). An estimated 3000 Zulu warriors were killed. No Boers were killed.

¹³ South African Republic.

“I **am** going left!”

“Oh, sorry **right!**” I swerved right, just making it into the correct lane and avoiding ending our honeymoon prematurely by smashing into the water-filled plastic drums that were ostensibly placed there to lessen the damage to ...what exactly? Your car? Your head? The metal barrier just behind the drums?

With my erratic driving and my ND (Durban) number plate, the locals had no doubt that I was a tourist. Transvaal drivers are an aggressive bunch and they hooted and gave me the finger as they drove past shouting obscenities (“*Fokken doos! Ek gaan you bliksem!*”), as I tried desperately to follow Jackie’s confusing directions.

Women were some of my favourite people, but their creator had made **at least** two errors:

1. They were far too emotional (and therefore scarily unpredictable).
2. They were built back to front, often insisting **adamantly** that left was right – or vice versa. The mood was getting tense – like a meeting of the past the present and the future.

“Take the next turn off!”

I was doing 100km an hour in the middle lane and the turn off was barely 100 metres away.

“FUUUCK!” I yelled as I swung quickly to my left somehow avoiding an accident as I cut across a lane and pulled to a stop on the yellow painted island which marked the split where the off ramp started. I was flustered. My anger was rising.

“FUCK Jackie! You need to give me warning than that. We could have DIED!”

She was silent. Confusing.

I turned to look at her. She was staring straight ahead. I looked through the windshield and saw a motorcycle traffic cop walking briskly towards me. He must have been just behind me as I swerved like a drunken madman.

“Oh shit!”

“Pull over there, sir,” he instructed as he pointed to the shoulder where his motorbike was parked, using one hand to stop the off-ramp traffic, enabling me to get across.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” he asked as he bent slightly next to the car, so that he could see inside.

“Sun City,” I replied nervously. Traffic fines were heavy. Not in my budget.

“Aah! I thought you were a tourist. Durban plates.”

“Yes, from Durban.”

He looked at Jackie, still holding the directions. He looked back at me and understood that it wasn't *my* fault.

'Well, sir. I'll give you warning this time. Please drive carefully and enjoy your trip.'

The Brotherhood of Man.

"Thank you, officer. Have a nice day!"

Jackie's navigation improved markedly after that, and she managed to successfully guide me to the Rustenburg road. It had been quite a feat., with numerous on and off ramps involved – onto the N4 – off the N4 – onto the N1 – off the N1 – back onto the N4 – and finally onto the R556.

She could now relax. Seat back, she was listening to *Summer Loving* on Radio Jacaranda, one of the famous songs from the movie GREASE, performed by John Travolta and Olivia Newton John. The GREASE double-album soundtrack had been the first record I had bought with my own money. Similar to the ROCKY HORROR soundtrack, it was a compilation of evergreen musical numbers often chosen for themed parties.

"Ok, we're here," I announced.

Jackie leaned forward and pulled on the seat lever, releasing her seat back into the upright position as we entered *Sun City Resort and Entertainment Centre*.

"Gee, I never knew it was so BIG!" she said, amazed.

Sun City was the flagship resort of the *Sun International Group*. My employers.

It was founded by the hotel magnate and visionary, Sol Kerzner, son of Russian immigrants, but born in Johannesburg, and grew up in the tough neighbourhood of Bez Valley. Accountant, boxing champion and musician in his early years, he decided to go into the hotel business in Durban when he was still in his early 20s, and became a successful hotelier, and was admired for such grandiose projects as the *Beverly Hills Hotel* project in *Umhlanga Rocks*, which was South Africa's first 5-star hotel. His most monumental (and controversial) achievement was the creation of *Sun City*, north of Johannesburg, in one of the apartheid-era *Bantustans* called *Bophuthatswana*, considering that there were no roads or infrastructure at the time.

It is rumoured that he flew over the area (which was then virgin bush), in a helicopter, dropping various coloured flags marking out his vision for what would become Africa's greatest resort.

"Golf course over here (dropping blue flags) – hotel over here (dropping red flags) - and lake over here (dropping yellow flags)" That's the myth anyway.

Construction started in 1975 and *Sun City* opened in 1979. Within another six years, Sol Kerzner had expanded the project to include four hotels, two Gary Player golf courses, the *Entertainment Centre* and even a monorail. Despite several musicians from Europe and the

US, including the UK-based *Musician's Union*, boycotting South Africa during that time, large sums of money were paid to bring top performers and bands to *Sun City*, including *Queen* (who I saw with Mack in 1984), *Frank Sinatra*, *Liza Minelli* and *Shirley Bassey*.

There were many sceptics, but the combination of world-class entertainment, gambling and *Sun City's* close proximity to major cities such as Pretoria and Johannesburg, led to *Sun City* becoming a huge success. The topless dancers probably helped as well.

Kerzner's motto was: "Blow away the customer."

Jackie was blown away. At the time, there were three resorts within the *Sun City* complex – *The Cabanas*, *The Cascades* and the original resort (the famous *Lost City Resort* did not open until 1992).

I pulled up to the entrance of the Cascades hotel. A bellhop appeared at once, pushing a dome-shaped luggage trolley made of polished brass poles. I popped open the boot and he loaded the trolley.

There is no valet parking in South Africa, so moved the car out of the traffic lane and we went inside to check in, bellhop tailing behind us. It was a new hotel, having only opened six years earlier, and was mind-blowingly opulent. The perfect final destination for Jackie. The foyer was huge – all marble and chandeliers, and a reception area bigger than our house.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith checking in," I announced to the smartly dressed brunette who had beckoned us to come to her counter.

"Welcome to Cascades!" she greeted us enthusiastically. "let's seeeee...OK. I have it. You're on the third floor – room 303. Please sign here Mr. Smith."

I signed.

"Thank you, sir. Siphon will see you to your room. He's the bellhop behind you. Enjoy your stay!"

"What about parking?" I asked quickly.

"I'm afraid you'll have to drive to the parking lot sir. There is a monorail you can take to come back, sir. It stops at the *Entertainment Centre*."

"Ok. Is it OK if I leave it outside for 15 minutes? I've moved it to one side. I would like to go up to the room first."

"Yes, of course sir. Not a problem."

One of the tenets *Sun City* was founded on was non-racialism. As *Bophuthatswana* was deemed to be 'independent' by the apartheid government, it was allowed to have its own laws – a policy which was sometimes referred to as 'self-determination'. Sol Kerzner took advantage of this fact and hired the best and brightest hotel staff he could find, regardless of

colour. There was a strict policy of equal opportunity and racism was not tolerated. **All staff** were treated equally. The success of any business depends on the level of happiness amongst its staff. By instituting this 'maverick' policy, Sol ensured the success of his project.

Sipho unlocked our room and held the door open for us to enter, followed, and then carefully placed our bags on the luggage rack next to the cupboard. He then gave us the obligatory 'tour'. "This is your bathroom," switching the light on as he spoke, moving to one side to let the excited Jackie through. Women tended to get quite excited about bathrooms.

"Wow! Look at the size of that shower! And there's a bidet!"

Sipho continued. "And here are the remotes for the TV and the AC," pointing to the remotes on the bedside table. He picked up a brown folder. "This is your information folder. It has all the information you need – phone numbers, activities, bars, restaurants etcetera. If there is anything else that you need, just dial 9."

"Wonderful, thanks Sipho."

Not having completed his duties, he strode towards the closed curtains, parted them, and opened the glass sliding door that led onto a wide veranda.

"And here is your veranda."

Once again, Jackie did not hesitate to investigate. "This is so cool!"

The *Cascades Hotel* resembles an Aztec pyramid that has been built with LEGO blocks, with each ascending floor being shorter than the one below, culminating in a rooftop penthouse, perched alone at the top of the angular pyramid.

Source unseen, a waterfall cascades down the side of the pyramid – hence the name. Indigenous trees from central Africa, create a 'jungle' along the front of the hotel, replete with imported birds such as red-fronted and brown-necked parrots, drongos, larks and African warblers. I think I even saw an African Grey. But the most curious species of all was the peacock. Although the peacock is fairly common in South Africa, it seemed a little out of place in this jungle environment.

The architecture of the 'pyramid' incorporated wide sloped foundations which only went up to the third floor before disappearing into the main structure. The easy gradient allowed the peacocks to scramble up to our veranda, wings flapping furiously as they half-flew, half-hopped their way to our level, and two of them, having sighted us, were now clumsily making their way to the veranda. *Pavlov's Peacocks?*

"Look! Peacocks!"

"Yes, that's amazing." I was trying show enthusiasm, but peacocks hold limited appeal for me.

"I'm just going to park the car. Back shortly, "I continued.

Sipho and I left together, and I slipped him a R10 note as we entered the lift. "Thanks, Sipho."

“You’re welcome, sir. Enjoy your stay.”

Jackie was sitting on the veranda, with what looked like a gin and tonic when I returned 15 minutes later.

“That was quick,” I remarked. “Liquid lunch?” I joked.

“This place is so wonderful. It’s amazing!” She was still awestruck by the ‘out-of-this-world’ quality of the resort.

“I got you a beer. I wasn’t sure how long you would be, so I put I in the mini-bar.”

“Thanks, my love. That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“Go get your beer and come and join me. It’s so relaxing out here. It’s like my own private jungle.”

Doing as she suggested, I went and sat next to her and watched, mildly amused, as the peacocks strutted up and down the wide veranda wall, making “Feed me!” noises, and showing off their tail feathers which were fanned out behind them in a magnificent display of blue and green, the ‘eyes’ on their feathers staring at us like cat eyes in a dark alleyway.

It was bliss. Here I was, sitting with my beautiful wife, drinking a cold beer and admiring the birdlife. “Life is good,” I thought, smiling.

“Are you hungry yet, or are we having a drinking day today,” I asked, not really caring what the answer was.

“Let’s have one more drink and then take a walk around the place. I saw a selection of eating places listed in the information folder while I was ordering room service. We can go check them out just now. No rush.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said as I walked to the phone, not wasting any time and ordering the next round from room service. I hated waiting for drinks. It was best to stack them up, like planes circling, waiting to land at a busy airport.

An hour later, having finished our drinks and done a quick circuit of the possible eating venues, we found ourselves at the *Cabana Pool Bar*, ordering toasted chicken and mayo sandwiches with chips – and more drinks.

“You know,” she started, “we haven’t done any swimming the whole trip. I was hoping to try on my new costume. I bought it especially for the trip.” We were seated poolside, and the pool sirens were silently luring her into the pool.

It did look inviting, so I said, “I could do with a swim. I’ll go get changed. You don’t have to get up. I’ll fetch it for you. Where is it?”

“It should be in my small, red bag. It’s got shiny scales on it. Thanks, dear.”

"Shiny scales! WTF!" I thought, but managed to avoid commenting. I was learning quickly.

I now had a mental picture of Jackie as a mermaid. It was disturbing, yet somehow alluring.

"Ok. I'll bring some towels as well."

"No need. There's a pool room over there. They have towels for the guests to use at the pool."

"Observant," I thought. "No flies on her."

Ten minutes later, I returned victorious, her scaly bathing costume tucked into the pocket of my swimming trunks, not wanting to get 'weirdo' stares. I discreetly handed it to her, and she disappeared into the pool room. Sipping my fresh beer, I noticed a brick pathway at the edge of the patio which led through the 'fake' jungle. VALLEY OF THE WAVES was written in gold lettering on a pointy piece of wood, the point indicating the direction in which it lay.

"Hey! You look nice!"

She had reappeared wearing a tight one-piece bathing suit which was covered in iridescent 'scales', the reflected light changing different shades of pink, blue and green as she walked towards me, mock-modelling her new purchase. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that were not scales, and that it was made of a rubber-like material. It looked expensive and showed off her ample bosom. Her tanned, sculpted legs were turning heads as she returned to her chair, her defined calf muscles losing their definition as she lay back down in the deckchair. It made me feel special. I had married this stunning beauty and I could almost taste the jealousy in the air as the other men pretended not to stare.

"Are you ready?" she asked, standing up once more.

"What about your hair?"

"It's been permed twice in the last ten days. I'm sure it will be fine," she answered confidently.

"OK. Just checking. But listen, before we get into the pool, I see a sign that says VALLEY OF THE WAVES. Over there...," pointing towards the brick path.

"Oh, really? I heard about that. They have a wave machine. Sounds like fun. OK, let's go have a look."

We followed the yellow brick road, the 'jungle' canopy blocking out the sun, and had to traverse a rope 'swing bridge' before it opened up to reveal a massive swimming pool which sloped gently onto a beach made of real beach sand, probably brought up from Durban. Every ten seconds, some special reticulation feature would magically create huge swells which would eventually break as their circular motion was broken as it reached shallower water, resulting in a horde of screaming kids as they were dumped unceremoniously onto the sandy bottom.

As a surfer, I knew that, later that evening they would still be trying to extricate sand from their crevices. Water is powerful. It is fortunate that the sun does not shine in certain much needed crevices, because the force of the water would surely douse it.

Jackie took one look at the kids and sneered at me. There was no need for words. I understood – LOUD AND CLEAR!

“I hate kids,” she sighed, as we returned along the path, back to the ‘quiet’ pool.

I couldn’t resist,” Does that mean we’re never having kids?”

“It most certainly does!”

“What if I want kids?”

“Go find someone else to have them with.”

I kept quiet. I didn’t want to push her buttons too hard. To be honest, I had no strong opinion either way. If we had kids great. If we didn’t have kids great. More money for beer. There were times, usually after drinking one beer too many, when I would get emotional and start to imagine what it would be like to have kids.

I would picture my two kids – one boy and one girl – calling me ‘Daddy’ and worshipping the ground that I walked on for no other reason than the fact that I was their father. They would love me unconditionally and be the best-behaved kids in the neighbourhood. I would spoil them with birthday and Christmas presents and we would go camping during the school holidays and I would teach how to ride a horse. Hah! Sobering up always brought me back to reality.

It was rather cold in the pool despite the sunny weather. Refreshing, some might say. A few brave souls were milling about the pool, determined not to lie to their friends when they described their “Glorious holiday by the pool,” but they didn’t last long, figuring they had ‘ticked that box off’ and that hypothermia was not worth trying to pretend that they were not fazed by the frigid water.

I was tempted to chicken out as well, but, once the pool cleared, I thought that swimming a few lengths might ward off the cold. One, two, three, four....it took me eight freestyle strokes to do a length – far enough to consider it exercise, but not far enough to tire me.

Jackie, misled by my bravado, decided to join me in the pool. “Brrrrr!” she shivered. “Are you mad?”

“It’s not so bad once you acclimatise. Give it a couple of minutes. You’ll be OK.”

She gave me that, “you must be on drugs” look, but gave me the benefit of the doubt and stayed. Challenge accepted.

The pool was clover shaped, and a pool bar occupied one 'leaf' of the clover, with a sunken circular bar which allowed the bar staff to serve the patrons seated on the submerged barstools eye-to-eye.

The sun was weary, drooping towards the west, its weakening rays shining, almost at right angles, on the front of the pool bar, reflecting brightly off the white fake marble counter, causing me to squint. A bright star, beckoning me. A beacon of hope.

"I tell you what dear. Why don't we go and sit at the pool bar. Look how sunny it is over there," I suggested to my poor shivering wife.

"Ok. We can try. But I need my towel," as she quickly ascended the pool ladder steps, retrieved her towel and wrapped it around her shaking shoulders.

"One Black Label and a single gin and tonic please."

"Any gin?" the bow-tied barman asked.

"Gordons is fine, thanks."

Jackie was now sitting next to me in the sun, her legs submerged in the water, as we sat on the barstools and drank.

"Much better," she declared.

We drank until the sun finally capitulated, retreating over the horizon. In an instant it dropped ten degrees – too cold to remain at the bar.

By now, even at my tender age, I considered myself a shareholder of *South African Breweries* (SAB), seeing that I had consumed truckloads of their products. Black Label is considered a 'strong beer' in South Africa despite its alcohol content only being 5%. European. UK beers tended to be stronger. Upon receiving my bar tab, I had a good mind to phone the marketing manager of SAB and tell him to send me some freebies.

"Just put on my room please."

We returned to our room. I was feeling a bit drowsy, so I hurriedly zipped into the shower before Jackie had a chance. It was lovely. I normally don't like hot showers, but I lived in Durban. I hated the cold.

Jackie was sitting on the edge of the bath, waiting impatiently for me to finish. She almost body slammed me into the wall as she pushed pass me.

"Shame," I thought. "Poor thing must be freezing." Apparently, chivalry was dead.

Feeling all warm and fuzzy – and a bit buzzy, I slipped into my 'sleeping shorts' and hopped under the covers.

I was rudely awoken. “What are you DOING!!” she bellowed, approaching the bed with a turban on her head and all wrapped up in a terrycloth dressing gown she had found in the wardrobe.

“I’m just resting a sec. I’ll get up in a few minutes.”

“You *always* do this!”

“What?”

“You drink too much and pass out!”

“I haven’t passed out. I’m talking to *you*, aren’t I?” being a smartass.

“You *must* really stop drinking so much!”

And so, it began. The ALWAYS and the MUST. Inevitably, the NEVER would come.

Yes, I did have a drinking problem, but I considered myself a ‘happy drunk’. I never got violent when drunk. OK, I retract that. Not with women. My default settings when drinking at home were funny, loving, stupid, sleep!

Jackie knew this, as we were often having people over for braais, supper, parties or board game night. Inevitably, I would disappear to bed without a word when I felt that I had drunk enough. No fighting. No drama.

But *now*, we were married! Marriage is an institution – you have to be crazy.

When a couple is living together, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. A GET OUT OF JAIL FREE card. No obligations. But the moment that you sign that marriage certificate, the light at the end of the tunnel is the light on the front of the train that is rushing towards you. You are screwed – and not in a nice way. It’s a train smash.

Now that Jackie and I were legally committed to each other, I was becoming a ‘project’ – something to fix. Someone to mould into the ‘perfect’ husband.

“Baby,” I began.

“Don’t *baby* me! I’m serious!”

“Okay, okay, I’m getting up.”

“No, sleep! I’m sure I will find a man to take me out to supper.”

It was no idle threat. She had done it before. Some guy had started chatting her up while she was sitting in the hotel bar at my workplace, waiting for me to finish work. He had then asked her out to supper, no doubt hoping that they would end up in bed together. He gotten a hefty bill, but nothing else. She got an expensive dinner for free and some company. I trusted her completely. She was very loyal but knew how to play the game. Men were to be used. Not the other way around.

“But it’s our honeymoon,” I protested, pulling a sulky face.

“EXACTLY! It’s our honeymoon!”

Getting the message loud and clear, I forced myself to leave the comfort of the bed and started to dress into my ‘smart clothes’ – long black trousers, long-sleeved pale blue shirt and new black Barkers.

There was a stormy silence between us. I suspected, like most things in life, all was not as it seemed. I was of the opinion that real crux of the matter was not so much my drinking, but the fact that she had spent half her salary on a new dress, specifically for Sun City. She was more concerned with the fact that she would not have the opportunity to show off her new white-laced evening gown.

Sun City is not a cheap place. Only the upper class and upper middle class could afford to stay at *Cascades*. The plebs had to make do with day trips. We were not yet class worthy, but we did consider ourselves YUPPIES, and, besides, it was our honeymoon. Everyone blew their budget on their honeymoon.

I was no ‘social climber’. Neither was Jackie. But women were hardwired to dress to impress.

It was announced recently, that scientists were on the verge of making nuclear fusion a viable clean energy source. Perhaps in as little as 20 to 30 years. This had always been the HOLY GRAIL of Science – mastering nuclear fusion.

If that was possible, then maybe it would be possible for a team of scientists to crack the human equivalent of the HOLY GRAIL – writing the OPERATING MANUAL for women.

Mark Gungor has a great video on YOUTUBE (*The Tale of Two Brains*) explaining (mansplaining) the difference between MEN’S brains and WOMEN’S brains. Men’s brains are compartmentalised - car, wife, kids, finances, job, etc. are all stored in SEPARATE boxes. The rule is that no two boxes may EVER touch. They also have a box labelled NOTHING.

Women’s brains have no boxes. EVERYTHING is connected together in one big rat’s nest of EMOTIONAL wiring. They remember EVERYTHING wrong a man does because when an event is connected to an emotion, it is burned into the memory forever.

This theory explains many things, but not enough. Women are still a mystery. An enigma wrapped in a puzzle.

However, it does give legitimacy to the answer “Nothing”, when a woman asks her (male) partner “What are you thinking?” He’s NOT trying to avoid discussing issues, he has just gone inside his NOTHING box.

Women feel the need to talk when they are upset. Men often misinterpret this as a cry for help. It is NOT. DO NOT try and FIX the problem! It is just her way of dealing with the issue.

Your only job as a man is to listen, nod your head, and SHUT UP. She is merely verbalizing the issue to make it easier for her brain to formulate a solution.

I had been silent, like a good man should be, for almost 20 minutes while I dressed and waited for her to finish up. I wasn't about to comment on how long it took women to get dressed.

She looked ravishing in her expensive sheer dress, which was tantalisingly sheer enough to reveal the faint silhouette of her underwear. Her tanned skin was accentuated by the paleness of her dress and her stiletto high heels allowed the dress to look more in proportion to her otherwise short stature.

As she carefully walked across the room to do her hair in the mirror, an involuntary shiver went down my back as I recalled the last time, she had worn high heels on one of our nights out. I had arranged a surprise karaoke night for her at a popular bar not too far from where we were living. All her friends were invited and those work colleagues of mine that she knew. It was a good turnout, with more than 50 guests making the effort. It was a great success.

My singing, like my dancing, has room for improvement, but I think that listening to people singing badly is quite entertaining, especially when they are friends of yours. It makes for a bit of playful mockery and laughter. Of course, the beer was flowing and, being the social lubricant that it is, was instrumental in getting previously reluctant people to make fools of themselves. I had not been reluctant – I always willingly made a fool of myself.

Jackie, who had a voice like an angel, was enjoying being the centre of attention. It was HER night! Her best friend, knowing that she loved high heels (they made her look taller than her five foot nothing) had bought her a pair for her birthday, which Jackie was now wearing.

Almost everybody who went up to sing asked her to do a duet and she was hardly off the stage the whole night. I had already been up to sing a few times, but the more I drank, the more I felt like singing, and I kept jumping the queue and going on stage prematurely. As we were all friends, and I was the organiser, nobody complained. My 'shower voice' was very entertaining so they let it slide.

Jackie, however, was pissed that I had stolen her limelight. This was HER night! Not one to play second fiddle, and with a thirst for revenge, she swiftly hatched a cunning plan – so cunning, in fact, that if you had pinned a tail on it, it would have been a weasel.

She joined me on stage and said, in her sweetest voice "Let's do a duet together."

Oblivious to the evil smirk on her face as she turned away from me to grab a microphone, I asked, "What song did you have in mind?"

"Don't worry, I already gave it to the DJ."

Just then, the intro percussion started, "*da-da-da-doom-chee-chee, da-da-da-doom-chee-chee.*"

It was Nancy Sinatra's version of *These Boots Are Made for Walkin*. This was her cue to start strutting sensually in her high heels eliciting cat calls and whistles from the appreciative audience.

It is a great song and easy to sing along to. I was silently applauding her choice of song as we sang in synch. We were killing it! Just towards the end of the song, she moved closer to me and whispered in my ear "Lie down."

The beer had dulled my acumen, so I foolishly obeyed, realising too late that it was a trap, as I felt my rib crack. "FUCK!"

She was quick and agile. Before I could wriggle out, she had successfully perforated me from my groin to my neck with her high heels, thankfully sparing my nuts for another day. The pain was intense. Paradoxically, I started to laugh.

Crying and laughing are close relatives, and I wasn't about to cry in front of all my friends. Still lying on the stage writhing in agony, but laughing like a madman, I realised the absurdity of the situation. My drunkenness had got me into this pickle but was now also numbing my pain.

Revenge does NOT have to be a dish served cold.

"Right, I'm ready." She announced. I snapped out of my reverie. "Don't we need to book a table?" assuming we were going out to supper.

"I'm way ahead of you buster. I booked one when you were in the shower."

"Oh. OK. Where are we going?"

"We're going to *Maltos*."

"Where's that?"

"It's here in *Cascades*."

"Oh. OK. I'm ready."

Trying to make peace, I said "You look lovely in that dress." Big mistake. She was still furious with me and was looking for any excuse to have a go at me.

"That's a real backhand compliment! So, I DON'T look nice normally. Is that it?" She knew she was being difficult, but this was her way of fucking with me. She was laying down the rules. Mess with the bull – and you get the horns!

"Sorry. Let me rephrase that. You look your usual stunning self, my love."

The 'my love' was my way of fucking with her. Tit for tat.

She smiled. To most people, including friends and family, it appeared as if we were always at loggerheads, but it was just the way we interacted. We *did* love each other. Our skirmishes were largely a battle of wits. A challenge. She was quick to anger but also quick to calm down. Thankfully. They say that opposites attract, but we were actually very similar in many ways.

Her assertiveness and lack of fear were big turn-ons for me. I had yet to find a chink in her armour. Pushover women were not for me. No fun in that. No challenge.

I had once seen an advert for an adventure travel company which stated, “If you’re not living on the edge, you’re taking up too much space!” After four years of living together, I understood that now that we were married, I must strap myself in for the rollercoaster ride of a lifetime.

“You have a reservation for a Mr. and Mrs. Smith, I believe?”

The maître de, looking like an aging penguin in his tuxedo, quickly scanned the reservation list and greeted us with a big, if somewhat forced, smile.

“Welcome to *Maltos* Mr. and Mrs. Smith! Let me show you to your table. Right this way,” as he led the way. Jackie looked around at the other guests as we were escorted to our two-seater table nestled in a cosy corner of the restaurant.

Although there were some smartly dressed women to be seen, most of them dripping in sparkling jewellery, she knew that her dress was sexier than any of the others on display. Men, seated with their wives (or mistresses) were trying unsuccessfully to be discreet as they cocked their heads slightly and strained their peripheral vision trying to ogle Jackie without provoking the ire of their partners. She glided elegantly past the wanting men, enjoying being an object of desire. There is another famous advert (for perfume I think) - “If you’ve got it – flaunt it!” And she HAD IT!

Two glasses of iced water arrived, as we sat down, brought by a young waitress wearing a long-sleeved white blouse and black slacks, her bowtie looking a bit too tight for her. She looked uncomfortable. She had a nervous look about her – probably a trainee.

“Would you like to hear our specials?”

“Sure,” I said.

She got down on her haunches (I think they are trained to do that so that you feel superior to them) and started to recite the specials.

“We have chicken souvlaki, cumin flat bread, macerated tomato, and cucumber. Then we have our signature dish of pan-seared salmon, dill lemon butter, grilled cauliflower steak and crushed peas. Our final special is our seafood platter of grilled prawns, calamari, and mussels, tossed in butter and served with rocket.”

“I feel sorry for the macerated tomato and the crushed peas,” I said flippantly. Jackie glared at me. I shut up.

“Just ignore him. He’s an idiot, and soon-to-be ex-husband.”

The waitress stifled a giggle and continued, “Let me take your drinks order while you decide on your meal.”

“My about-to-be ex-husband will have a glass of Sprite and I’ll have a gin and tonic please,” said Jackie, taking charge.

“Single or double?”

“Just a single, please.”

Knowing that she was poised to pounce, I quickly steered the subject away from drinks.

“What the hell is a cauliflower steak,” I asked.

“Heads of cauliflower, seasoned and roasted in the oven.”

Jackie knew her vegetables and always insisted on cooking when we were at home. That way, she killed two birds with one stone – being able to make all her favourite veggie dishes and also giving her the chance to monitor my diet. She knew that if I was in charge of meals that they would be all meat and no veggies. She cared a lot about my health, always encouraging me to eat better, exercise more and drink less.

Sometimes, when our schedules allowed, we would go cycling together. She was an absolute cycling fanatic and had the calves to prove it. I preferred surfing. I also played rugby for the local rugby club, but that was more an excuse to stay out late in the club pub on a Saturday night and drink with the boys. The club barman was under strict instructions to say that there was “Nobody in the pub,” regardless of if it was full or not. Mobile phones went and ruined our fun. Jackie preferred to stay at home and read or sew rather than waste precious time watching Neanderthals beating each other up over some odd-shaped ball. I had a bumper sticker on my car: RUGBY IS PLAYED BY MEN WITH ODD-SHAPED BALLS.

“Not for me.” I pulled a face. “The only cauliflower I ever enjoyed was in a curry.”

Cauliflower, Brussel sprouts, cabbage and broccoli were the enemy of my meat-loving stomach, but I did eat them when Jackie cooked as I was too scared to refuse.

There were a couple on menus on the table. I picked one up and opened it.

I ran my finger quickly down the left margin, scanning for MEAT.

OFF THE GRILL jumped out at me, filling me with joy.

The very first listing was ESPATADA. That was it. No need to look further.

‘Char grilled beef skewers (300g) marinated overnight in sea salt and bay leaves, finished with thyme butter.’ Mmmmmmmmm.

I was pretty certain that ‘leafs’ should have read ‘leaves’, but as long as the meat was tasty, I didn’t care too much.

“I’m having the *espatada*,” I announced, pleased with my choice.

“You?”

“I’m thinking of the Sicilian beef lasagne.” She had grown up in a town with a large Italian community and loved all things Italian.

“We came all this way and you’re ordering lasagne,” I teased.

“Stick with what you know,” she responded, smiling. The food was outstanding, and by the time we were finished I was sober.

“What now?” I asked the boss.

“Bed,” she said. “Tomorrow is another day.”

“OK. Good. I was thinking the same thing. I ate so much these pants are feeling a bit tight. It’ll be nice to get out of them.”

“You can get out of your pants, but don’t think you are getting into *mine* tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not in the mood.”

“That’s a first. Are you turning into a woman? Do you have a headache.” She was enjoying giving me a hard time.

Supper had been a success and the good food had put her in a better mood. The rollercoaster was going up.

Having lived together for four years already, we were less like honeymoon sweethearts than an old married couple, and we each had our own routines. She went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and do all the mysterious things that women do in bathrooms. I undressed, threw my clothes on the chair, slipped into my ‘sleeping shorts’ and got under the duvet. I was fast asleep before she was finished in the bathroom.

DAY EIGHT. Tick. ✓

Chapter Nine – Blood River

Snuggled inside my warm sleeping bag as I lay in my dark tent, listening to the birds chirping in the surrounding forest, I suddenly became aware of an animal sitting on my chest. I froze.

“What was it? A squirrel? A honey badger? A mongoose?’ I wondered, panic setting in. Fear of the unknown. I was trapped. I had pulled the zipper all the way up and my arms were inside the bag. I couldn’t escape. Like an Egyptian pharaoh’s slave, embalmed alive – awaiting death. I was doomed.

“Wake up! Wake up! You’re having a nightmare!”

I awoke with a start. Jackie was spooning me, her left arm weighing heavily over my chest.

“Are you OK,” she asked, concern in her voice.

“Just a nightmare,” I said. “It’s nothing to worry about.” Then quickly followed up with “It wasn’t about you.”

“What was it about?”

“I was falling off a cliff,” I lied, not wanting to tell her that it was her fault I had the nightmare.

“It’s a very common dream,” she said authoritatively. It was a teacher thing. She was a fountain of knowledge. “Did you know that the two most famous interpreters of dreams – Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, have different interpretations of dreams?”

“No,” I lied. I had done a school project on the subject, but I feigned ignorance. No need to irritate her by trying to be a know-it-all.

Taking her spooning as a positive sign, and not wanting to talk further, I turned to face her. She knew the procedure. We kissed passionately, releasing a cocktail of dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin. It was a natural high and led to more intimate activities. Bliss. We lay there glowing, still trying to calm our breathing after all that exertion, her head on my chest, one hand playing with my chest hairs.

“Ouch!” as she plucked a hair.

“Sorry, it was bugging me. Look how long it is!” waving it in front of my eyes.

“Bitch,” I said lovingly. “Ready for breakfast?”

“What time is it?”

I reached for my watch on the bedside table. “Eight-thirty. Gee, I slept late. What time did you wake up?”

“Six-thirty. I read for a while.”

“Alright. Lets’ go eat.”

Back in the room and hour later, Jackie took the two slices of bread she had wrapped in a paper napkin during breakfast and went onto the veranda, intent on feeding the birds. As she slowly broke the slices into small pieces and scattered them across the veranda, yellow warblers swooped down from the 'jungle' canopy and started furiously pecking at the breadcrumbs.

"Don't feed the animals dear."

She turned, one eyebrow raised, and said, "I feed **you** every day when we are at home!"

"Touché," I smiled, retreating to a safe distance.

The jealous peacocks were indignant and came flapping up the 'ramp' as awkwardly as the *Wright Brothers'* first aeroplane, quickly displacing the warblers, as they hovered up the scraps.

Jackie was like a child with a new toy. "They're sooooo beautiful!" she cooed.

It was our last day. I was paging through the information folder while Jackie admired the peacocks. "OK," I started. "Here are our options for today. Go to the pool – again – play golf, archery, visit the game reserve next door, go lose our money in the casino, *Waterworld* or a boat cruise around the lake."

"Say again. Boat cruise?"

"Yes. They do a 30-minute boat cruise around the lake twice a day. The first one leaves at 12 noon."

"I like the sound of that."

"It says here that you get to see a lot of birds. You'll enjoy that."

"Yes, I would. OK. Let's do it."

"It's a quarter past ten now," leaving her to decide how to pass the time until noon.

"No point in going anywhere now. We can just chill till about 11.30 and then take a walk down there."

"OK dear."

I lay on the bed, remote in hand, watching TV. The default channel was the marketing channel for *Sun International Resorts* – looping ads showcasing all the activities available to guests.

Wild Thing by The Troggs was playing as an aerial view of the *Wild Coast Sun* resort golf course was shown, which then panned out across the sea, showing the sun rising over the private

beach, gold-streaked palms dotted throughout the 750-hectare property, situated on the *Umtamvuna River* which forms the *KZN/Transkei* border.

The *Transkei*, another apartheid *Bantustan*, was ruled by the Matanzima brother in the 70s. Sol Kerzner paid one of the brothers, George a bribe of \$1 million to acquire the land to build the casino and resort, which resulted in the *uMgungundlovu* community residing there at the time, being forcibly removed and dumped in the *Mzamba* communal area. George was arrested and sentenced to prison. Sol Kerzner evaded charges.

Sun City adverts were now playing – slick videos of smartly-dressed, deliriously happy guests, making perfect golf swings, eating lobster, winning in the casino and celebrating with champagne. Just like REAL life.

“Time to go dear!” I called to Jackie who was sitting on a now bird-less veranda. Like me, she worshipped the sun, and had a cat-like ability to always find a ray of sunshine to bask in.

The lake was too big to miss, and we had no problem finding the jetty, where a medium-sized flat-bottomed boat, complete with sun awning, was moored. I estimated that it could seat 20 people comfortably.

I did a quick count, “One, two three... there were 15 adults and three kids. And us. The cruise was free for guests, so it was a popular activity choice. Another few minutes and we would have been out of luck, just as the guests hurrying along the path towards the jetty were now. Our ‘captain’, his name badge displaying his name as JABULANI, was dressed in Bermuda shorts, a white golf shirt and a sailor’s cap.

“Please step aboard,” he said politely, then hooked the rope he was holding across the jetty entrance, announcing to the disappointed latecomers, “Sorry, the boat is now full. There will be another cruise at 3.30. Please come early to guarantee a seat.”

This was no migrant dinghy crossing the English Channel from France. Overloading was unsafe, and safety was of paramount importance at the resort.

I let Jackie go first, and she slid along the 4-seater bench to the end. I was next and an Afrikaans speaking couple slid in after us – with the two big guys squashed together in the middle and their wives all free and easy on the edges. What gentlemen we were!

The guy next to me was a beast of a man. He must have eaten **all** the pies! At six foot two, I am not a small man, but I felt rather insignificant next to him. It was like being in the middle seat on aircraft and having the Springbok prop between you and the aisle. No quick escape to the bathroom. But we weren’t on a plane, and I was sure that I would last 30 minutes without needing the bathroom, so I knew would survive.

We cast off and started on our slow cruise around the edge of the man-made lake. The bird life was amazing, with flotillas of Egyptian geese, swans and white-faced ducks allowing the boat to get quite close to them, having lost their fear of the noisy ‘sea monster’ long ago.

I handed the camera to Jackie. “There should be about 20 or so pictures left on that spool.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking the camera from me. The perimeter of the lake was full of birds, with each species forming a little community of their own.

“Birds of a feather flock together,” I thought.

Jackie was in her element. “Look! There’s a Goliath heron! Look! There’s a flamingo!”

And so it went, the click, click, click, of the camera signalling the end of the roll of film – and her photo-op.

Having completed our circuit of the lake, the captain skilfully cut the engine as we approached the jetty and we glided alongside, Jabulani quickly hopping off to tie off first fore and then aft.

“That was lovely. Thank you dear,” enthused Jackie, getting on her toes to kiss me full on the lips, in an uncharacteristic public display of affection.

“I should start every day with a sex session.” I thought, mistakenly hoping that it was all about **me** and not the birds.

“Straight to lunch,” I enquired.

“No. Let’s get room service. I feel like just vegetating in the room this afternoon. I don’t feel the need to busy all the time. We’re on holiday. I’m happy to do something tonight though.”

“And I’m happy to veg.”

I had let her order the food. Twenty minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

“Room service!”

I opened. A waiter was standing patiently next to a trolley, the contents of which, were covered by a white tablecloth.

“Come in,” I beckoned. He set the trolley in the middle of the room and handed me the bill to sign. I slipped him R10. “Thank you very much sir!”

As he shut the door behind him, I whisked the tablecloth off with the flourish of a magician, hoping like hell that I didn’t break anything. Jackie was obviously in one of her rare ‘junk food moods’. There was pizza, French fries, fried chicken and a small bowl of salad to ease her conscience.

“Are we ‘vegging’ without any veggies today?” in a weak attempt at wit. She rolled her eyes, not bothering to answer. In an ice bucket lay two Black Labels.

“God, I love you woman!” I was thinking as I opened a beer.

“Where’s **my** drink?” she complained. I could see nothing.

“I dunno. What did you order?”

“Gin and tonic.”

I could not see any other drinks. “Nope. Nothing here.”

She came to make sure. “There they are,” she pointed downwards. Being shorter than me, she could see the bottom shelf of the trolley, where the two gin and tonics were carefully placed in cardboard carrier, which had four circular cut-outs for inserting glasses. “I know it’s not your fault,” she said, seeing the look on my face. “I know you are too tall to see down there.”

Phew!

I arranged my two pillows against the headboard, and, with a plate of Hawaiian pizza on my lap and a beer next to me on the table, I started flicking through the TV channels. The hotel had its own movie channel and I saw that one of the options was *When Harry Met Sally*.

“Have you seen it?” she asked.

“Baby, you know I only watch movies with you.”

“Maybe you saw it at one of your friends’ places.”

“Yes dear. My big rugby-playing friends are all rushing to watch it,” I replied sarcastically.

“Well, I want to watch it. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” She knew I was a closet romantic comedy fan and that I always pretended that I was watching just to keep her company, but I would never admit it to my friends. Only action movies like *Terminator* were open for discussion.

I was a bit of a romantic, and had even secretly written a book of poems, and sometimes, when drunk, I would get a bit emotional watching sad movies. I’m sensitive. Sometimes, a bit over-sensitive.

Jackie was also in bed, sipping her gin, watching the movie and flicking through the information folder at the same time. Multi-tasking is something only women can do. I couldn’t scratch my balls and walk at the same time.

“Hey!” she exclaimed.

“What?”

“Do you know Judy Page?”

“That Afrikaans woman that sings on TV?”

“Yes, her.”

“What about her?”

“There is a dancing extravaganza show on in the *Entertainment Centre* this month. She’s the headliner. I want to go. It’s called *Bravo*.” Jackie would watch anything with dancing in it.

“Won’t you please phone reception and ask them how we can tickets please?”

She wasn’t being lazy – the phone was on my side of the bed, and she was comfortable.

“Ok dear.”

Reception said that they would arrange tickets and that we could just pick them up from the desk when we went down.

“What time does the show finish?” I asked.

“Ten o’ clock, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Turning to Jackie, I told her that show only finished at 10pm. “It’s going to be a late supper,” I remarked.

“Don’t worry about supper. If we get hungry, we’ll just phone room service again. I’m not sure if I’ll eve eat after pigging out all afternoon.”

By 7.30, we were all dolled up and, after collecting our tickets, went up to the first floor to use the pedestrian bridge to the *Entertainment Centre*. It was a huge building, mostly filled with a 6000-seater arena, but with plenty of space, and had a ten-pin bowling alley, a large food court and hundreds of slot machines. There was also a KIDDIES area where weary parents could leave their energetic kids while the adults enjoyed themselves.

Many famous artists had performed at Sun City over the years. Frank Sinatra was reportedly paid \$2 million dollars to perform over just one weekend. Beauty pageants, world title boxing matches and a quite a few extravaganzas had, over the years, been staged here.

Arm-in-arm, I escorted Jackie inside the foyer of the arena. She was once again looking splendid in her new white-laced gown, and I was feeling very lucky to have this brunette bombshell as my bride.

It was crowded. There was a bar in the foyer, and, as drinks were not allowed into the seated area, a lot of the patrons were ‘panic drinking’ trying to have as much as possible before the show started. Especially the men. A two-hour dancing show with missus. Hell no!

Leading Jackie by the hand, I slowly edged my way into the crowd, trying to get to the bar counter. In hindsight, I should have left her behind and gone and fetched the drinks.

Finally managing to get through the throng, all that was left to navigate now was a heifer on high heels, who was leaning heavily on the bar and looking a bit wobbly. She was a hefty woman in a silver thigh-high dress, and from behind, it looked as if she was melting – her fat rolls clearly defined by the too tight dress. I was hoping she didn’t sneeze and cause a wardrobe failure.

She seemed quite drunk. And alone. Maybe the two were connected somehow. The Afrikaners have a polite way of describing a tipsy person, “They have looked too deep into the bottle.” It sounds better in Afrikaans, *“Te diep in die bottle gekyk.”*

“I shed gif me a drink!” she shouted at the barman. He continued to ignore her and continued serving the other patrons.

“I shed gif me a drink!” Louder, this time. He was intent on ignoring her. It was the best policy for dealing with drunkards. Don’t engage.

The barman was black. Stunned by the audacity of a black man disobeying her, she slipped into her native tongue and shouted, *“Luister kaffir! Ek shoek a drink nou!”*

The nearby patrons went silent, all turning to see who was being so rude. Although South Africa was still technically run by an apartheid government, it was no longer acceptable to say the ‘K’ word in public. Yes, it still happened from time to time - like now – but it was unacceptable.

All eyes were now on MISS PIGGY. My only focus was getting drinks before the show started, so I was squeezing myself between MISS PIGGY’s somewhat comforting frame and the other patrons - within reach of my goal.

“That’s not nice!”

Jackie, not at all impressed by the rude, drunk, fat slob, was about to go nuclear on MISS PIGGY.

“You can’t insult the barman like that! That’s shameful! Racist bitch!”

“Oh boy,” I thought, “Here we go!”

MISS PIGGY swung around, wanting to see who had dared to interfere, and the much shorter Jackie collected an elbow to the face.

Like a cobra striking its prey, her arm uncoiled and delivered a textbook punch to the nose, aiming at the back of the head as she had been taught by my work colleague, not stopping her thrust on impact, but following through.

A collective “Whoah!” from the crowd as MISS PIGGY’S head snapped back, blood spurting from her nose, like a scene from ‘Carrie’, silver dress now covered with rivulets of blood.

This was better than watching rugby. MISS PIGGY was in shock. Trying to stem the flow of blood with one hand, she barged through the crowd towards the exit screaming,

¹⁴*“Die bitch het my gemoer! Die bitch het my gemoer!”*

The crowd started clapping.

¹⁴ “The bitch hit me!”

“Bravo!” one of the patrons shouted. Jackie was conflicted. She was enjoying the attention but also felt a bit embarrassed for being so unladylike and causing a scene.

“Your drinks are on me,” the barman whispered, leaning over the bar counter so that nobody could hear what he was saying. “Thanks ma’am.”

“Thank *you*,” said Jackie.

MISS PIGGY had left the building. Probably looking for Elvis to console her. The crowd had already forgotten the incident and were once again focusing on getting drinks, jostling each other and trying to get the barman’s attention.

As we were now VIPs, we had received our drinks first, and I led Jackie to a quieter spot in the foyer, out of the limelight. I felt like a proud father. My little girl could handle herself. A regular ninja.

The foyer bell rang, announcing that it was time to take our seats. We made our way inside and found our seats, perfectly positioned in the centre of the arena – not too far and not too close. The glittering costumes of the topless showgirls were worthy of Las Vegas and the choreography sublime.

Judy Page, her voice like a nightingale, captivated the audience, singing well-loved musical numbers selected from such hit shows as *A Chorus Line*, *Hairspray*, *My Fair Lady* and *Oklahoma*. I thought it was good value for money. I bet the men would have happily paid just to see the topless dancers stand still and silent on the stage. The singing and dancing were just a bonus.

“I wish my legs were longer,” confessed Jackie to me at the intermission.

“You have perfect legs my love,” knowing it was my cue to make her feel better.

I was aware of ‘short-man syndrome’, where men were overly aggressive and macho in order to compensate for their stature, and I suspected that Jackie’s assertiveness and fearlessness was also related to her height.

The show over, we found ourselves back in our room a little before 10.30pm.

“Hungry?” I asked, getting undressed.

“No. I’m good,” as she went to do her nightly bathroom routine.

Standing by the doorway, unbuttoning my shirt, I said, “That was quite a punch.”

“It was, wasn’t it? I do feel a bit bad though. I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

“She deserved it. Pain is a great teacher. Hopefully, she will be become a better person.”

“I’m not sure about that. She seems to be a hardwired racist.”

“Oh well, I’m going to bed. We have a long drive tomorrow. Nearly ten hours if you include stops.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. Two hours to Johannesburg, seven hours from there.”

“Damn! We should try leave early then.”

“Exactly. I was thinking of setting the alarm for six fifteen. Then we can pack quickly and go eat breakfast at about seven. I’d like to be on the road by 7.45.”

“OK. Sounds like a plan.” Being a teacher, she was used to getting up early.

I set my alarm, threw my clothes onto the armchair and climbed into bed naked, deciding against wearing my sleeping shorts.

“Don’t get any ideas.” She was peeping at me from the bathroom.

“I’m not dear. Just couldn’t be bothered. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter Ten – The Things We Won't Do For Love

The alarm woke me. Opening my eyes, I saw Jackie already dressed, busy packing her bags. She did not travel light. For this trip, she had purchased the biggest suitcase she could find, mainly out of ignorance, as she had never been on a trip longer than a weekend before.

Just to be sure, she had packed *another* smaller suitcase. And, of course, there was her handbag, one of those deceptively large handbags that might have been a gift from Mary Poppins. It seemed that anything and everything could fit into her handbag. One of the mysteries of the universe, right up there with the BIG BANG THEORY. Keeping on schedule, we packed, ate and checked out, on the road and in Rustenburg by 8.40am.

The WEST RAND is relatively underdeveloped compared to the EAST RAND, so there were no major roads from Rustenburg to the N3 road to Durban, necessitating a detour east and then south before connecting to the N3. It was a very tricky route involving 17 on and off ramps – a daunting challenge.

I hate Johannesburg. A couple of years earlier, I had been offered a well-paying job there and had refused, as I had long ago vowed never to work in Johannesburg. It was too busy. Full of aggressive people, all rushing to get somewhere. And polluted. Give me the beach and clean air any day.

I was a bit nervous. The complicated route left a lot of room for error. Jackie, sensing my apprehension, offered to navigate. She, too, did not want to get lost again.

“Please give me a running commentary,” I requested. “I need lots of time to get into the correct lane. These roads are crazy.”

“OK.”

There were some parts of the highway that were eight lanes wide, and, without the benefit of local knowledge, I had to be very careful to stay in the correct lane. I had to get it right the first time. Rush hour traffic was easing, but I actually didn't mind the slower pace of the traffic as it afforded me more time to change lanes.

Ninety minutes of hell!

Jackie had been cool, calm and collected, and had miraculously – and successfully - navigated our route without raising her voice once. I was grateful for that. We were now on the N3. It was a straight shot to Durban. You could literally drive all the way to the Durban beachfront without making a single turn. *Easy peasy.*

“Thank you dear. Good job. I could never have managed without you.”

“Pleasure treasure,” as she reclined her seat back to her default position. Radio Jacaranda was now playing *If You Don't Know Me by Now* by Simply Red.

“I think I know you pretty well by now dear,” I smiled placing one hand on her thigh.

“Focus on the road,” she teased, placing her right hand on mine.

The air pollution thins as you leave the industrialised areas surrounding Johannesburg behind. It was another sunny winter day. The scenery improved as we neared the small town of Villiers an hour later, with wheat growing as far as they eye could see – a bit like Kansas – and only interrupted by the occasional field of sunflowers.

Villiers lies on the FREE STATE side of the Vaal River and was founded by Lourens De Villiers in 1882. The wagon route between Durban and Johannesburg was of vital importance to trade, and the wagons crossed the Vaal at Villiers.

At that time, the Vaal River was the most important boundary between the then ORANGE FREE STATE and the then TRANSVAAL REPUBLIC (Transvaal means ‘across the Vaal’). Both governments erected toll houses on either side of the river banks which remained in force until the creation of The Union of South Africa in 1910. In the rainy season, a backlog of up to 300 wagons waiting to cross was possible.

“I’ll stop in Harrismith,” I announced. “Or do you need to pee before then?”

“How long till Harrismith?”

“Hour and a half.”

“No. I’ll be OK. Carry on.”

“Righty-ho.”

There is a flat-topped mountain that sits overlooking Harrismith, which looks very similar to *Table Mountain* – its more famous Cape Town cousin.

It is clearly visible from more than 30km away, and as it came into view I said, ‘Almost there. It’s there by that flat mountain,’ pointing ahead.

“Just in time. I’m about to burst.” Men had so much easier when travelling. Just stop, whip it out and instant relief.

Near the bottom of the long hill that leads down into Harrismith is a rest stop. I pulled into it. Being the halfway point between Johannesburg and Durban, it was a well-developed rest stop, with a petrol station, restaurants, fast-food franchises, clean restrooms, and even a playground for the kids. Plus, parking for about 300 vehicles.

I filled up with petrol while Jackie went to ‘squeeze a lemon’, having arranged to meet her at the WIMPY restaurant. She was already seated by the time I arrived.

“We’ll have to eat quickly,” I said. “Still a long way to go.”

It’s only one o’ clock,” she replied, “we should be OK.”

“Yes, we’re doing well timewise. We should get there before dark.”

Knowing that I was going to be eating cereal again from now on, I decided to pig out on *another* full English breakfast, even though I had one that morning. WIMPY are known for their all-day breakfast, so it was not a problem. Jackie had two fried eggs and toast, with chips and tomato. No meat.

On schedule and less than 5 hours to go. I was pleased with our progress. Most importantly, we had not got lost or had an argument. Happy days!

The road between Harrismith and Van Reenen's Pass is a bit of a rollercoaster, due to the undulating terrain that marked the edge of the escarpment. The dorp of Van Reenen sits at the top of the aptly named Van Reenen's Pass, built in 1856 to open up trade between Natal and the Orange Free State. We passed the WELCOME TO NATAL sign.

We were now in our home province, which prompted Jackie to sigh "Back to work tomorrow."

"Me too, but at least I'm on nightshift. I can sleep late."

"I hate you."

"I love you too dear."

I smiled as *Highway to The Danger Zone* by Kenny Loggins played on the radio, as I carefully descended down the pass. The hairpin bends and steep gradient required all of my attention, and it was, indeed, a danger zone. At one point, there is a flat section that sits right on the ridge, where the high-pressure wind forcefully seeks the low pressure beyond the ridge, with a sign that reads: CAUTION - REDUCE SPEED - WINDY CORNER, forcing the trucks to slow. Their much bigger surface area makes them susceptible to being blown over and I had seen many a truck, on previous trips to Johannesburg, lying on their sides, having been blown over by the deceptively strong wind.

As I carefully wound my way down the pass, the loud roar of air brakes filled the air, as they engaged lower gears. It was not uncommon for trucks to plummet down the side of the mountain, and it demanded the full attention of the truck drivers to avoid this from happening. The dedicated truck lane had arrestor beds strategically placed along the descent, providing a 'safety net' for the many trucks whose brakes failed.

I could see the town of Ladysmith at the foot of the pass as we neared the bottom. We had now completed a circuit around eastern South Africa, starting on that fateful DAY TWO when we had stopped there to get the radiator replaced.

The thorn bushes around Ladysmith slowly gave way to dry winter grasslands, as we passed by Estcourt and Mooi River. We were now in the *Natal Midlands*, a farming district less than two hours from Durban and a popular weekend getaway destination, with many farm stalls, beer gardens, country-style restaurants, quaint colonial-era hotels and child-friendly bed and breakfasts.

Passing Midmar Dam, I took a brief trip down memory lane, remembering the sailing weekends we had spent there as a schoolboy. We climbed up towards Hilton, home of the most expensive private school in South Africa, and started down the long, winding treacherous approach to Pietermaritzburg – *Town Hill*.

It wasn't as dangerous as Van Reenen's Pass, but still demanded my full attention. On foggy nights, it was a death trap, and best-done during daylight. As we neared the bottom of Town Hill, we could see the dome of smog that covers the valley where Pietermaritzburg lies.

Pietermaritzburg (PMB), more commonly shortened to Maritzburg, was founded in 1838, just after Piet Retief and his seventy-strong party were killed at the Zulu capital of Mgungundlovu -in February of the same year - and was where the reprisal *Wenkommando* departed from to defeat Dingane at the *Battle of Blood River* on the 16th of December 1838. It grew to become the capital of the short-lived Boer Republic of Natalia, until Britain took over in 1843 when it became the seat of the Natal Colony's administration.

It is also the town where a young Mahatma Ghandi was removed from a train after refusing to obey the conductor's order to move to the van compartment, despite having a first-class ticket. Shivering through the winter night in the waiting room of the station, Gandhi decided to stay on in South Africa and fight racial discrimination. A bronze statue of him still stands in Church Street in the city centre.

Today, Maritzburg is the capital of the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN). The N3 highway skirts around PMB, so most people prefer to continue to Durban rather than stopping there, as Durban is only 75km further.

It was almost 4pm when we reached the bottom of Town Hill, and the clock-watchers who worked in town were already heading home, signalling the beginning of rush hour. All the on ramps were full of cars emptying out onto the highway creating a traffic bottleneck.

"Want to take the shortcut?" I asked Jackie.

"I think so," she agreed.

The road from PMB climbs up out of the valley for 13km, where the R603 *Umbumbulu/Umlaas Road* turn off is. It is a much narrower rural road that winds its way down to the coast, on the south side of Durban. It is not a faster route, but a less frustrating one. Passing Tala Game Reserve, we slowly made our way to the coast. There are many small villages en route, each one with a roadside school, and the numerous speedhumps ensure that you don't speed.

We reached the coastal N2 highway just after 5pm. We were on the last stretch of our eventful honeymoon road trip. A plume of steam from the SAICCOR plant, rose crookedly into the air, indicating a light easterly wind, as we crossed the *Umkomazi River* bridge. We had made it!

"And everybody thinks

That I'm the fool

But they don't get any love from you

The things we won't do for love

The Tracy Chapman tape was playing.

Stopping the car at the top of the driveway, I switched off the engine, turned to Jackie and said "Thank, my love."

There was no need to explain. She knew that it was a blanket thank you, covering everything.

"Thank you too," she smiled, squeezing my hand.

END

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