



CONTINENTAL DRIFTING

*The truth at last - what really happened
on those trips*

KEN BRANDON

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BY KEN BRANDON

When you're traveling, you are what you
are right there and then. People don't
have your past to hold against you. No
yesterdays on the road.

-William Least Heat-Moon

DEDICATION

*To my wife Debbie for her forbearance while
I chased this dream over the years. And
further to Debbie who gave me the greatest
gift anyone could receive, my darling
daughters, Kate and Amy, my raisons d'être,
the only truly unselfish love I've ever known.*

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PROLOGUE

Now let's get one thing straight before we start. If you think this is a travel edition, then think again. True, all the action takes place on foreign shores but one doubts that the reader will learn much about these distant places through the reading.

So, let's travel back in time to before it all started.

In 1970, having studied arts for a year and law for nearly two, the big lesson I'd learnt was that I needed to be somewhere else. Sure, I'd learnt other things but nothing really curriculum based. Financially I was struggling, earning the princely sum of \$18.90 per week after tax, working as a law clerk. Suffice it to say that I was not residing in the lap of luxury. My brief stint at studying law was somewhat of a watershed for me. I was working for a suburban solicitor who, every day, would provide me with the day's work of documents for registration, exchanges and settlements, and off to the CBD I'd go to take care of business. These activities would fill my day and I'd return around five to knock off for the day and go to uni, an exciting existence I can tell you. Within a brief space of time I worked out how to cut my time in half by finding short cuts and consequently had time on my hands; not necessarily a good thing. That's when the trouble began.

Among other things, I started wandering into book stores. Although at that stage I was poorly read, I possessed a pretty good general knowledge and was aware of the "great books". The only books I'd read as a child were those on glossy "Golden Books" on history, geography, natural science and the like. In fact, my knowledge of world geography was quite extensive.

My father owned a furniture store, the family business begun by his father soon after arriving in Australia from England in the early 1900s. Every Saturday morning, from age ten to about thirteen, my job was to do the dusting to make

everything look more presentable and therefore saleable. I always contrived to dust myself into a corner of the store where sat, almost neglected, a formica-covered desk featuring a map of the world. This piece of furniture was probably the only item I dusted properly. I had to; otherwise how else would I have learnt every capital city, all the major bodies of water and anything else about the world which would fail to get me a job in later life should I live that long.

Novels didn't really appear in our house. In fact, I came from a family that basically could, but didn't read. I'm not really sure how we spent our leisure time. Sport and outdoors mucking around was always on the agenda and, living close to Bondi Beach, my holidays and weekends were spent indulging in whatever the beach had to offer.

Television arrived, courtesy of the furniture store, when I was seven, but there was very little to capture the imagination of a child of my age. I certainly don't remember listening to the radio. That was something adults did; this was a memory of that time. By the time I'd left school, I'd probably read about half a dozen novels, preferring to read the Classic Comic version of David Copperfield, for instance, and various cribs of prescribed novels for my matriculation studies.

So, getting back to the point re my working day. I found myself with about three hours to kill every day. I read prodigiously, started doing crosswords and wrote poetry. Hardly the stuff that would make me a lawyer.

These were heady days all right. The Australian economy was booming and the stock market was a place where people gathered all through the day. There were fights, literally pushing and shoving, to get into the viewing gallery. It was wonderful entertainment. The subsequently infamous Poseidon mining shares exploded from about \$0.80, peaking at \$382 within a couple of months. There existed a delightful camaraderie amongst the punters and dreamers of fortunes.

Everyone wanted in on the act. Owning shares seemed to be a licence to print money. I took a gamble. How could I lose? I bought 5000 shares in International Mining, on a tip, for ten cents each. I figured by the time I had to pay for them, I could sell them and pocket a nice profit. Two weeks later they had dropped to five and the broker was ringing asking for his money; \$500 was almost half a year's wages. Here was another reason to get out of the country.

I remember being at King's Cross with a couple of friends having a late-night coffee as was our wont, bemoaning the probability that I was going to debtors' court. (Maybe I'd receive reverse-Transportation and end up in England for seven years). We talked a while and headed to Taylor Square where one could

buy the first edition of the morning tabloid around midnight. I purchased the paper and, it was in the next hour or so that my life took a, not unpredictable, turn. It was my watershed moment. At that time, I was, indeed, a stranger in a strange land when it came to the law. I never felt really at ease donning a suit every morning and entering the world of respectability. The shares had shot from their measly five cents to 18 cents overnight in London. Two days later I sold a quarter of them for 38 cents, paid off the broker, handed in my notice and purchased a one-way ticket to London. I never attended another lecture. Both I, and the legal profession, breathed a massive sigh of relief.

I boarded the plane in early October, two days after selling the last 1500 shares for \$4.50, a tidy little profit. The trip didn't last long, just over two months; I was a babe in the woods.

But the seeds were well and truly sown. Some would grow to become the grapes of wrath but overall, the vintage would prove fruitful. I returned to Australia and completed an honours degree in psychology followed by a diploma of teaching. These degrees would normally take five years; I managed to stretch them into eight by taking three year's leave of absence to work and travel. I drove taxis, became an ambulance officer, worked as a trolley boy in a hospital where I spent an inordinate and morbid amount of time observing autopsies and learning about the body human, and engaged in many other jobs over the next decade before finally gaining employment as a teacher.

Now, over 150 countries later, I can look back on some amazing times spent on foreign shores. People keep saying I should put pen to paper. I waited long enough and have finally put fingers to keyboard. A few of them, not the fingers silly, but stories, appear in the following pages.

And one more thing; these "times" occurred in a golden period for me when I didn't have a career job and was afforded the luxury of being able to pack up and head to parts unknown whenever I'd saved enough to do so.

What follows is not necessarily in chronological order nor should one expect a sense of continuity in the reading. They are discrete episodes in that decade or so of part of a fortunate life. Some of the players appear more than once as, of course, do I pretty much always, in this picaresque collection.

INTRODUCTION

I don't know what came over me (I had a notion to send it to a lab for analysis, but what the hell!) - I had a sudden need for disclosure. And having access to a computer made this a lethal cocktail. I'd spent probably over five years on foreign shores and now I wanted a piece of posterity. So, in the early '80 I sat down and documented my ride. Almost forty year later, I took it from the draw, blew the dust of time from it and voilà, here 'tis.

I'd read volumes of travel books and very few of them seemed to capture the essence of the travel I knew. So why was that? It wasn't as if my mode of travel was greatly different to many thousands of others of my generation. Maybe they were having such a good time or were completely drugged out that they never bothered to chronicle their experiences. Maybe they were too busy writing about where they were, to actually be there. Something was missing.

While I'd travelled with many people over those times, two of these companions featured most prominently in my reminiscences. Their story also needed to be revealed. Both of them took time off, over the years, to join me in my peregrinations. Now where, for instance, would Michael fit into my travel tales? Once you know the guy, travel and he seem somewhat incongruous. One would be more likely to encounter his name in some obscure journal of venereal diseases or in the foreword of a travel book under the umbrella of health and hygiene. Steve, on the other hand, well, where could I place him in the world of literature? This is a thought almost too horrible to contemplate. And besides, certain threats of litigation might preclude aspects of that exercise. No, their literary resting place lies at the end of my pen - almost unclassifiable in its mix of anecdote and insight, humour and sadness, the quintessence of what travel was like for me and so many others who will so readily identify with many episodes in this collection.

This offering hasn't been tarted up or bathed in euphemism. No apologies are offered. This is warts, piles and more. Not even the names have been changed to protect or, should one suggest, disguise the guilty and innocent alike. This is how I remember it happening and who dares to gainsay me? As the French so eloquently put it: "Que le fuck!" and who are we to question that philosophy?

So fasten your seat belts, put the cat out (and that'll teach you to play with matches), keep the Serepax handy, and don the mantle of nostalgia and come back with me to when the going was good - I mean really good.



INTO AFRICA

ONE

UP THE DOWN NILE

(January 1980)

What the hell does that mean! Up the down Nile? Well. I'm glad you asked. Two things. First, if you look at a map of Egypt, you'll notice the Nile flows between, say Cairo and Ethiopia. Even though proceeding in that direction it looks down, it's actually up the Nile to its source in Lake Tana in Ethiopia if you follow the Blue Nile or into Rwanda and possibly Burundi if the White Nile is your go. And second, I'm having a little fun in referencing various works of literature, music or, just simply, quotes. The title of this chapter references the educationally dystopian novel *Up The Down Staircase* written by Bel Kaufman, published in 1964 and later made into a film. Virtually every sectional heading in this offering humours this bent. But where was I? Oh yes. To the narrative.

I - ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE

Ray went to bed wearing only a t-shirt – that was never the last thing I wanted to see before turning the lights out. It was Athens, it was December 14th, 1979 and it was cold enough to freeze the nuts off a fruitcake. Speaking of whom, Steve was festooned with every item of clothing in his pack, which was probably just as well because his chimeric fitness regime had long since fallen into desuetude and the sight of his naked or near-naked corporeal self, soon after witnessing Ray's, was asking too much of one's sensibilities.

I simply wore a pair of knickers. Fascinating already isn't it? For more excitement, read on. We all wore moth-ravaged bedcoverings that probably

hadn't been changed since Pericles had been in occupation whilst knocking over a few laws more than a couple of millennia ago. So, there's no accounting for tastes. The next flock of moths would want to be anorexic.

I had prevailed upon them both, months earlier, to travel with me from Cairo to Nairobi before I continued on alone for the next four months traversing the Dark Continent. They'd both taken long-service leave and were more than happy to join me in my current peregrinations. Ray had a one-man suburban accounting practice and lectured in the same at one of Sydney's universities while Steve had a small legal practice which he was happy to close for the month in which he'd be travelling with us. I didn't need to take leave of anything except maybe my senses. I'd been working as a porter in a large Sydney hospital, transporting patients back and forth to their wards and ultimately, some of them, to the morgue where I struck up acquaintances with the pathologists and garnered a crash course in pathology and anatomy. I had simply pulled up stakes and headed off into the great unknown where I wandered for the best part of a year.

The effects of countless vodkas and the cumulative toll of a Mandrax (henceforth "mandy") here and there, started to kick in and it wasn't long before Morpheus and his offside Hypnos were knocking on the door ready to weave their magic. Maybe they'd both come visiting together. Why not, we were in their neighbourhood - just down from the Acropolis and hang a right into the sleaziest hotel on the block. And while you're at it why not bring the rest of the Pantheon; the souvlaki's still warm and the vinegar man was here earlier so the retsina's got a nice chill to it.

It must have been about two o'clock local time when the room was rent by Steve screaming (and what's worse than a rented room being rent again?). It took me a few seconds to pause, rewind and realise what he'd said.

"That's it," he exploded excitedly, "Paradox!"

"Yeah, great," Ray and I chorused simultaneously which was no mean feat under those circumstances or any others for that matter.

"No, that's the word I was looking for to describe that strange little church we saw this afternoon," he went on.

"That's lovely Steve. Now if you don't go back to sleep and let us get ours, I'll give you another selection of words you can choose from," I suggested.

It was important for me to maintain a certain perspective when dealing with my two companions. I'd known them for many years and the proverbial 'grain

of salt' often needed to be called into play. As Con Acidophilus, my kindly Greek neighbour had once observed, *δκχι αφυπιδφκ κχοσμα ασδφ φαιναυχχραε γεγ φκ ζφκφηφδεφφμ ασδφ* sentiments that even now I find difficult to disagree with.

II - FROM HERE TO FRATERNITY

The flight from Athens to Cairo takes about half an hour. Literally, although by the time we'd arrived at our destination it seemed like an eternity.

We'd quickly purloined a carafe of orange juice to dilute what was left of our duty-free vodkas and somehow managed to end up with a dozen stale bread rolls. There was probably a reason for this, but to this day it still eludes me.

Steve had been fixated on "paradox" and had uttered it a few times during our embarkation (or as the Yanks would say "emplaning"). It's just possible that the airline steward had interpreted his utterance as a "pair of ducks" and provided us with some suitable poultry sustenance. Never question good fortune; you may not like the answer, let alone understand it.

Steve and I sat beside each other while Ray sat behind us, next to an Egyptian businessman who wisely twigged that any confession to understanding English was going to get him a first-hand account of a romp in the Hindu Kush. (Someone had once told Ray, as he was regaling him about his sojourn on the subcontinent, that he was quite a raconteur. Unfortunately, he couldn't see his verbal assailant's polygraph machine reacting frenetically and he'd believed him. We'd been paying for it ever since). We'd long suspected that the guy either didn't understand English or was desperately trying to avoid any transaction with him. But Ray's spirit was indomitable and, spurred on by the clear fluid with which he'd contaminated his OJ, made inquiries of the stewardess as to how he might join the mile-high club. He was a cheeky boy, was our Ray.

The two passengers in front took a deep breath and cringed but the assaultee, unfazed, disappeared into the cabin and returned seconds later with some forms in Greek which Ray proceeded to muse over - was it really the club membership form? I suppose, had he filled it out quickly, launched into his version of foreplay, completed the act itself, exchanged addresses and proffered the usual apologies, he could have relaxed and still finished a couple of crosswords as well as humming the second side of the Beatles' Rubber Soul album off key before we "deplaned" (don't you just love it!) in Cairo.

III - LEGLESS IN GIZA

Cairo Airport was as dirty and indistinguishable from any other dirty and indistinguishable international airport in the Middle East. Getting through the official impediments didn't take as long as we'd expected. The only hitch came when we were required, as tourists, to change \$150 into local currency before we could proceed. We argued for about fifteen minutes that we were only staying in Egypt for a few days and that was much more than we'd need etc. One hundred and fifty in Egypt back in 1979 could buy a lot of original papyrus etchings and since I was on a severely restricted budget that had to last up to a year, I was somewhat reluctant to see it take a walk so early on in the piece.

Then I hit upon an idea. What if I changed my \$150, had my form stamped so I could show currency control, and then somehow pass it back to the others, they could get through and give me \$50 each and we'd be on our way. It took a lot of fiddling around but I finally managed to slip the form back to Ray (I don't know where Steve had wandered off to) and he approached the barrier. It didn't work. They'd obviously seen too many other gringos try this and a multitude of other ruses many times before and were ready for us. Ray changed his \$150.

Meanwhile Steve had sailed through another gate and met us on the other side. The bastard had changed his cash telling them he had Austrian currency and only had to part with about a tenth of his lucre to get the same amount of Egyptian pounds as we had. (I made a mental note to slip a fair lashing of tabasco onto his next meal when he wasn't looking.)

Then we were outside the terminal trying to locate bus 41 whose destination was Tahrir Square where word had it the cheap-and-nasties were located. The problem was that the numbers on the buses were in Arabic as opposed to the Hindu-Arabic script we're used to. Maybe if they were in Hindu-Kushic Ray could have...but that's another story which has been told time and time again. In the end, after receiving no help from the locals I took a punt based on my memory of a few years prior when I'd spent a couple of months in Iran and Afghanistan. We embussed (damned Yanks!) and rattled in the direction of downtown Cairo. Ten minutes into the trip I chuckled to myself. This caught Ray's attention - he was standing about three metres away - and he wanted to know what was so amusing.

"Just a bit of irony that struck me, that's all. Nothing important."

"Tell me, I could do with some lightening up," he asked.

“Well,” I ventured. “The thought of three little Jewish boys lost in the suburbs of Cairo just tickled my fancy, that’s all.” (Henceforth Ray would not view this comment with a great deal of fondness.)

“Shut-up, Ken!” His face was drained of colour.

“Hey, you asked me,” I retorted defensively.

“Get Fucked!” he fulminated making the second word sound remarkably Arabic. I sensed, instinctively, that this was not a conversation he wished to pursue.

Steve meanwhile, observing this, was chuckling quietly to himself.

“Why don’t you ask Steve what’s amusing him?” I countered.

Ray had moved halfway down the bus by this time. I guess it was going to be every man for himself.

IV - THERE’S A SMALL HOTEL

We reached the square about forty minutes later and I deposited the lads at a coffee shop while I wandered off with an American girl and her Egyptian boyfriend in search of accommodation. I don’t even know where they materialised from - maybe they were an unused plague from biblical times. He drove me to a couple of spots but fortunately they were full - they were a bit of a worry, situated in dark alleys. They dropped me back near the square amid profuse apologies and left me with regrets that the girl wasn’t staying with me.

I then stumbled onto another local character who called himself Sergeant Pepper (your guess is probably better than mine.) There was, in all likelihood, a sanatorium nearby and they’d left the gates open. He took me to the *Hotel Ismala* which was two doors away from the boys who were blissfully unaware and unappreciative of the efforts I was making on their behalf. The hotel was actually the eighth floor of a building which had, we estimated, been earmarked for demolition about twenty years before (that’s before the biblical Exodus). It was the sort of building that, in Australia, if it were being sold would be labelled “Renovator’s Delight”.

There didn’t appear to be any stairs which was a shame. The only means of ascending to this establishment was in one of those lifts which one rarely sees these days. It was fashioned like a cage which more often than not didn’t stop precisely at the floor you were going to. Instead it was necessary to step or

climb up or down, and sometimes as much as half a metre in order to arrive at the designated floor. And one always had the feeling of uncertainty that a safe arrival wasn’t always on the cards. Nevertheless, the tariff was a paltry \$4 per night including breakfast which hopefully wasn’t poultry, having observed some emaciated birds in a grubby courtyard out the back.

The room was understandably basic but possessed some amazing views over the square and if you really cricked your neck you could make out the Nile off to the left (water glimpses). Steve could see, in his mind’s eye, his ancestors pushing stones towards the pyramids.

“Bloody typical!” I muttered. “What’s the point in pushing stones towards the pyramids if they’re already there! Late again. I knew you had a history of lateness but I had no idea it extended back this far.”

Ray checked under the beds for some reason which neither Steve nor I could fathom, before we decided to chance our luck with a local meal. We went down to the lobby and who should be sitting there but, you guessed it, Michelle Pfeifer (I can dream can’t I?). It was, the ubiquitous character, Sergeant Pepper whose eyes lit up as they alighted upon us. I hoped this guy wasn’t going to become a regular feature. “Did I unwittingly save his life?” I asked myself, “and was he going to protect me for the rest of my days?” These types can be harder to shake than smorgasbord of venereal diseases. Still it made sense - being assaulted by a pepper. Enough to leave one a little chilly.

Anyway, our military acquaintance directed us to a greasy spoon where we settled for a kebab and beans, a tasteless concoction which is probably just as well since I was later informed that beans in Arabic translates to “foul” so maybe the taste buds were spared this one. Pepper remained with us so we bought him a beer which seemed to make him happy. The continuous cacophony of car horns ensured that we wouldn’t hang around long.

V - UP AT A STRANGE HOUR

The next entry in my diary is somewhat apocryphal. It simply says “3.36 a.m. - had first erection on trip.”

I suspect it means something - it could hardly have been monumental (the occasion or the erection) but still, there it was - an entry in search of an entry. This was going to be one hell of a day!

And so back to sleep.

VI - SHIT HAPPENS!

And if that note wasn't incongruous enough, then the following day gives up this entry! "Steve reveals that he hasn't shat since the plane from Sydney." This whole thing is really starting to wax scatological. Well, it had only been three days so I told him there was no cause for alarm since long plane trips often had that affect. He then revealed something that he'd been longing to get off his chest for nearly ten years and I relate it to the reader as a fascinating digression and exercise in human ingenuity.

It seems that Steve was wandering the streets of Madrid in the early 70s when he felt a desire to heed nature's call. Now Steve's grasp of Spanish could only pale into comparison with his legendary grip on other things (and we're not talking linguistic here). He just couldn't make anyone aware of his dire need. And then, a glimmer of hope! He saw that hallowed word "QANTAS" on a facade and duly entered. It was a travel agent all right, but rather than just excuse himself and ask for the rest room, he took a seat and waited to be attended. His turn arrived quickly enough and still rather than come straight to the point, he proceeded to make enquiries about flying back to Australia. Meanwhile the dam was approaching bursting point. Meltdown was imminent.

This was the stage where he found those three little words that, for years, he'd been dying to ask: "Where's the toilet?" (I suppose a contraction counts as only one word). The woman pointed to the back room and continued to make her calculations as our hero sauntered, as nonchalantly as he could manage under the circumstances, towards his place of deliverance. From then on things happened in rather rapid succession.

As soon as he spotted the door with the sign which read "Hombres" or something to that effect, he covered the ground in record time, established himself on the porcelain whereat an explosion occurred that literally, he swears, lifted him off the seat leaving the cubicle in a very sorry state indeed. So much so that when he appeared in the office again, he almost broke into a run with nary a glance at the agent who had been awaiting his return. For days after he would break into a cold sweat trying to recall whether or not he had given his name.

VII - WATT A SHOCKER!

I walked out on to the balcony to take in the views. I've never been crazy about heights and admit this time was no exception. The balcony was safe enough and the railing seemed steady but that old familiar feeling crept back into the

viscera. What the hell, I thought to myself (is it possible to think to someone else?). Maybe I can do a little work on this acrophobia thing. I approached the rail and tested its sturdiness. I then put my feet under the railing so that the toes wiggled eight storeys above the mayhem below. With my waist level with the top rail I bent over intending to touch my toes. Then whack!! I was lifted straight up off the ground about a metre and then fell onto the rail before glancing off it and crumpling to the balcony floor.

I lay there stunned for a couple of seconds before looking to see where Ray or Steve was hiding. I figured one of them had snuck up behind me and given me a sharp kick or punch over my heart. But I was alone. I slowly began to rise and realised I had little movement in my left arm. I also noticed that the fingers of my left hand had burn marks on them. What actually had occurred was that, connected to our railing was a neon sign displaying "HOTEL ISMALA" and I'd obviously come in contact with it and given myself, I guess, a decent shock. Maybe I was lucky that my centre of gravity was on the right side of the railing. Within an hour I only had a slight numbness in my arm although the scars of the burn marks remained some months. Needless to say, my acrophobia wasn't cured and my desire for callisthenics at altitude no longer held any deep-seated attraction.

VIII - JUST TOOT 'N COME IN

We spent the next few days in and around Cairo doing impressions of wide-eyed, hyperthyroid gullible tourists. The Egyptian Museum replete with mummies etcetera, as well as the Pyramids, was high on the list. The latter, were, to a degree, a little disappointing, the reality bringing the romance to a shuddering halt. All the pictures I'd ever seen of them and the Sphinx had led me to believe they stood almost in glorious solitude somewhere in the Sahara. Wrong! To take a photograph of the Pyramids with the desert as a backdrop one has to be standing in a narrow corridor to avoid getting the local humble dwellings contaminating the scene. The Pyramids are now part of the urban landscape.

The Sphinx was appallingly tiny given the image that I'd entertained since childhood, and had been suffering from some senescent form of skin disease; such had been the ravages of pollution on its features. The scaffolding was up and restoration was in progress.

Still, it was fun scaling the decaying surface of Cheops' last resting place and wandering into the tunnels that Carter and company had excavated sixty

years earlier. Really. All one had to do was “toot’n’ come in.” B-boom! But wait, there’s more! They recently found a mummy encrusted with chocolate and hazelnut; they suspect it was the Pharaoh Rocher! Ok, now I’ll stop.

IX - A FLIGHT OF FANCY

A day later and we’d spent the best or worst part of an evening with a couple of TWA hostesses from St. Paul. Steve was seriously pondering the ingestion of some laxatives and our laundry hung suspended on our balcony choking in the smog.

In fact, Steve’s moment of truth was only hours away. The following morning, he set off to the hallowed cubicle, a sanguine face if ever one existed, and emerged ten minutes later as proud as a tot who’s just woken up with a dry bed. Forget the fact that there was no bog roll (this, of course, opened a whole new area of enquiry I had no desire to explore).

On our walk through the market a little later, however, the most amazing thing happened. Steve walked up to a street-side stall, the owner took one look at him, slammed a loo roll down on the counter, Steve slapped some coins likewise and the transaction was over without a word being exchanged! He never did talk about the incident and I never had a notion to ask him. I guess some things are best left unexplained.

Ray confessed later that Steve had, in his moment of relief, asked to borrow some paper (can one really borrow toilet paper? Does the user return it in some fashion?). When Ray proffered only two sheets, albeit two-ply, Steve took offence and returned to his pursuit.

I simply made a note not to be around when Steve next did his washing.

We spent the rest of the day trying to get visas into Ethiopia without success. Perhaps we should have tried to get the visas with success. In frustration we gave up, thinking to try the next day.

We returned to the *Ismala* and ran into the hostesses who suggested we go to dinner. Did they think there was such a thing as a free meal? We needed no encouragement - I decided I’d been celibate long enough. After the meal we found ourselves back in their room. Things were looking good. And then Ray began to tell one of his travel stories. It would’ve been all right if I hadn’t heard it so often that I could have taken over, verbatim, at any point. But the women seemed interested! What was a guy to do? I did what anyone would do under the circumstances. I fell asleep!

X - HE AIN’T HEAVY - IT’S JUST THAT WE HAVE PARENTS IN COMMON

We decided that trying to obtain our Ethiopian visas in Cairo was going to lead us nowhere but in circles and ever decreasing ones at that. In fact, the only place it wasn’t going to lead us to was Ethiopia. So that evening we caught the evening sleeper to Luxor.

The dining car was an experience in itself. The train rocked and jolted so much, more food ended up on the table and in my lap than reached my lips - indeed, there was a multitude of slips ‘twixt the cup and the lip. What I thought was Steve’s macaroni sauce was actually the coke that had missed the glass as he tried to pour it.

Ray complained of a stomach ache so in order to shut him up I gave him a mandy explaining to him that it would be just the cure. I didn’t mention it would provide more relief for us than him. Minutes later he said he was feeling a lot better. Obviously the mandy hadn’t started to take affect but the placebo had.

Then he overheard the guy at the table next to ours speaking to the waiter with a German accent and decided to exercise his high school German. Ray immediately engaged him in conversation. He began prattling on and we could see our friend, who turned out to be Austrian, was looking for a way to escape. I also suspected the mandy was starting to kick in. Ray stood up saying he was going to the toilet and would be back soon.

I could see the Austrian weighing up whether to leave the food and make a run for it or keep eating and hope to be finished before Ray reappeared. It was a consideration he needn’t have bothered about for upon getting to his feet, Ray suddenly, with the help of the train’s rolling, lurched sideways into the poor witless guy’s lap, restrained only by Steve who helped break the fall. It was clearly time for Ray to go to beddy-byes.

Steve and I struggled with him through the corridors in the direction of our cabin - not an easy task. Ray was babbling on about being horny, would you believe, and started complaining about some women he’d been with - someone who dribbled, another who was keen but “unlearned” and yet another whose kisses were confusing! Yes Ray, we really needed to hear this. Anyway, after he’d finally lost all coordination, we managed to drag him into the cabin and push him into his bunk where thankfully nothing more was heard from him until the morning. I don’t think we ever did tell him about the mandy.

XI - WHAT'S IN A NAME?

At five the next morning the porter knocked at our door and managed to convey to us that the train would be arriving at Luxor in ten minutes. He repeated this exercise three more times, the last occasion being at five to six, before the train actually arrived at six. Maybe his English vocabulary consisted of three words: "arrive ten minutes". Not the sort of person you'd want as a guide, although experience has revealed to me that they do exist.

Booked into the *Hotel Happy* (\$2). The *Hotel Happy*! How do these people choose these names? Do they presume that by calling it the *Hotel Happy* the guests are going to overlook the fact that the place is in imminent danger of collapse? Like most other "cheap and nasties" I'd encountered I could have compiled a standardised list of "Things to do in order to make this establishment almost habitable". The idea of hoteliers in non-English speaking "emerging countries" labelling their dumps "Happy", "Beautiful", "Shangri-(bloody) La" and the like is taking suggestibility a little too far!

We slept an hour and then ate breakfast which would have been entirely unremarkable except for the fact that there were hordes of sparrows and starlings both on the ground and on the wing resulting in a few direct hits to our table. This is probably where the custom of serving cocktails with little umbrellas originated. It had always puzzled me why little umbrellas are used at all. They serve no practical purpose - at least those ridiculously shaped plastic things can stir a drink but umbrellas, well, all they do is keep some poor buggers in the third world employed and wondering what the hell the first and second world are up to when they need miniature parasols! And does Lilliput really exist? These and other questions...

XII - CRIMEA RIVER

So here we were in Luxor, the town that is the gateway to the Valley and the Kings, the last resting place for many of the pharaohs and their consorts. Maybe they should have called the caves where the tombs were situated "The Hotel Rest" or "The Hotel Afterlife so pack a few things in a small boat and kill a retinue of servants just in case there is some substance to all this afterlife malarkey".

We hired some pushbikes and caught the ferry across the Nile (all of about 100 metres) and proceeded pedalling towards the famous valley. It's a shame, really, that the Amazon couldn't be 81 kms longer than it is so that it could then

be, not only the world's largest, but the world's longest river. The Nile is only a mere trickle compared to the mighty Amazon.

Since it's impossible to ride all the way, we left the bikes and walked over the hills to get to the actual tomb sites. Even though it was late December the heat was still oppressive. The ground was barren with not a shrub to be found. Shade was not an option and the humidity must have languished in single figures. Any creature that had shuffled off its mortal coil in this landscape would be mummified in no time.

Busloads of tourists were waiting for us at the end of our hike - we'd obviously not read our handbook well enough. Anyway, it may be all very well to tour Egypt in an air-conditioned coach and stay in five-star hotels but unless you put in the leg work and suffer the ravages of the weather and the *Hotels Happy*, inter alia, then are you really there? I mean, if you can remember the 60s, then you weren't there! We paid homage to a different god of travellers: Bacchus Packus - the nominal deity of the cheap who are given to both hedonism and flagellation in the one breath. Read no further if you desire to find out more about this area. We came, we saw and we went back to the hotel and did some serious damage to a bottle of warm local wine.

We also, in a state of enthusiasm, spent the best part of an hour bargaining with a local felucca owner before hiring his services and his craft to take us up the Nile to Aswan, the next port of call. Actually, if you look at a map, Aswan is south of Luxor and one is tempted to say that to get there one travels down (aforementioned). It does seem a little strange.

It takes feluccas less than a day to do the reverse trip under sail. It seemed rather romantic sitting on a small sailing vessel for three days in cramped conditions with nothing to do but watch the river banks and be exposed to the searing sun. On second thoughts it seemed a little crazy as well. Later that evening, as the effects of the alcohol wore off, our proposed venture didn't seem so romantic after all.

XIII- JUST IN TIME

Serendipity: chance finds. It exists everywhere. But a coincidence means nothing unless it's brought to our attention. Is it otherwise a coincidence? Trees in forests will always fall noiselessly unless someone is there to hear them. Years ago, I got into the habit that if I thought I'd recognised someone from years gone by, no matter how obscure the connection, I'd nearly always ask the question.

When I was about ten and attending Sunday school for religious instruction I remember having, as a teacher, an elderly man by the name of Mr. Cooper. He wore glasses thick enough, I thought then, to set his eyes on fire if he looked in the direction of the sun. He was approaching the end of his teaching days and his classroom discipline was in a sorry state. We took great delight in infuriating him. He ranted and probably secretly wished all sorts of vile visitations upon us be they heavenly or of the more mundane variety. But he never snapped. That is until Alan Jacobs did something and I can't even remember what. Perhaps he simply spoke, but what a time to do it! Perhaps it was simply the straw that broke the camel's back (a neat biblical segue). Mr. Cooper slapped him across the face sending shock waves throughout the room. A tenuous peace was restored and, either because Alan was too embarrassed to mention it to his folks or because back in those days an occasional slap was within the bounds of respectability, nothing came of the matter.

So, we're standing at Luxor station at about six in the morning waiting for the Aswan train, when I saw this fellow waiting for the Cairo train. And he looked familiar. Now obviously I'm not going to write about a Sunday school incident that occurred twenty years ago and then say that this guy is someone completely different. It was the Jacobs lad! He couldn't remember the incident, although he did admit to being in the class. But did his jaw bear a faint redness redolent of an event that may or may not have transpired over two decades ago? I'm guessing not.

Ten minutes later the northbound train had arrived and departed taking Alan Jacobs who for the second and probably last time in my life was momentarily significant.

Steve was probably unaware of the great moment these ephemera had provided. He was desperately in search of a cuppa. He had entered into a heated bi-linguistic debate in which he had lamentably represented the English tongue trying to drive the price down from a paltry ten piastres to eight. Even at ten he was looking at the equivalent of a few cents. Anyway, the tea seller wasn't moved and so moved on (this English is a bugger isn't it! - and there's that word again) much to the disappointment of the small crowd that had assembled to witness the exchange and consequent non-exchange (did I mention what a bugger this English language is?).

Ray, not to be outdone but certainly to be undone (English again), had a smaller group gathered around him. I sauntered over. He was in the throes of putting on his money belt, the donning of which necessitated the unfastening of his jeans. Lord only knows why he didn't do this at the hotel before leaving! Anyway, this being what one might consider an unusual sight at sunrise at

Luxor Station, had become, after Steve's essay, the cynosure of local attention. Pants were dropped and pants of both types were raised along with eyebrows. It was definitely time to leave Luxor - certainly before the invitation came to do the same.

XIV - HAIDAM SEEK

Arrived early afternoon at Aswan and immediately purchased tickets to Haidam* in order to catch the steamer which was due to leave a little later in the early afternoon to Wadi Halfa, a journey of two nights. Now, there are a couple of tracks at Aswan. One had a train on it and the other didn't. We were reliably informed that the one with the train on it was headed in the other direction and that the one sans train would soon be occupied by the very train that would transport us to Haidam.

I've often been criticised by my travelling companions over the years for asking the same question of locals too many times. Actually, my practice is to ask as often as it takes to get the same answer twice. This day I only bothered to ask once. The train that wasn't going to Haidam had obviously developed a mind of its own and departed to Haidam. Just why anyone would voluntarily go to Haidam was anybody's guess. We needed to get there in a hurry. Not that anything ever leaves promptly in this part of the world. But if it ever did, you can be sure that this would be the day for it. There's always a taxi at any station, except when you really need one, and on this day, we really needed one. One did manage to arrive within a few minutes and we negotiated a ride to Haidam.

Our bargaining power was a tad diminished since he knew exactly why we were headed there. We even had to pay for his return journey since he'd be making the trip empty. The boys weren't happy about this one but I'd driven taxis myself and this wasn't unreasonable. So we paid him the four bucks which was roughly equivalent to the entire overnight journey to Aswan from Luxor with a guided tour of the "Valley" and a sit-down buffet lunch. The cabbie had just made a killing; this venture took us all of thirty minutes.

We arrived in quick time since there was, curiously, virtually no traffic on the road. And for everything there is a reason and the reason, was quite simple - the boat wasn't due to leave until the next day. Was it possible the taxi driver knew this along with everyone else? These and other questions needn't be answered. We suspected so.

So now we had to get back to Aswan. The driver didn't leave after dropping us off. There didn't seem to be any fares around so why was he waiting we asked

ourselves. His behaviour was incriminating him. We had no choice and he knew it. He informed us the fare back to town was four dollars. Two dollars I could understand since that seemed to be the price of one leg of the journey. He went on to explain that he would have to make the return journey to Aswan empty. I felt myself coming to the boil (where's a lancet when you need one?). The boys started to heatedly point out the logic of our position. Surprisingly, logic was something in which he'd expressed an interest, so we retired while he waited. But I guess when someone's holding you over the barrel, logic doesn't need to be part of the equation. I hushed them and then motioned them into the taxi in a gesture of assent.

So back to Aswan. As we neared the centre of the town, I saw a policeman and told the driver this was where we were getting out. He stopped, we got out, he asked for the money, I pointed to the policeman and he sped off. So maybe justice is alive and well even if even if only fleetingly.

Checked into another cheap hotel in the late P.M. after bargaining unsuccessfully again (why did I get the feeling that there was only one hotel and one taxi in this place?). Had a meal at the local which went right through me so I bolted back to our room well ahead of the others. Just as they returned the lights went out so Steve went down to complain and they were restored. This happened three more times before we resorted to the candles that are understandably ubiquitous to hotels in this part of the world. Of course, within minutes of lighting the candles the lights went back on.

This little exercise was repeated a number of times before I poked my head out of the window and noticed, while our lights were out, all the other rooms remained fully illuminated. So back to the front desk again where we finally prevailed upon the concierge to give us new quarters. And so to bed.

We were awakened sometime after midnight by the tap spluttering and the windows rattling wildly as the generator swung into action. It was about this time that we abandoned any further attempts to sleep and spent the remaining hours before dawn alternating between killing flies and reading. I still had mild stomach cramps and a touch of diarrhoea.

How will we ever forget our time in Aswan? Obviously, it would not be easy but rest assured we would try.

*I mention the setting off point of Haidam a number of times in this section. But years later whilst doing a little research, do you think I could find it? It was almost as if it never existed despite, when we were there, there were signs everywhere that begged the contrary. It was only recently when I Googled a map

of Egypt that it all became clear; that spot had now been anglicised to High Dam signifying its location on the river. So, there you have it.

XV - THREE MEN ON A BOAT SHI-ITE HAPPENS

We went in hasty pursuit of the steamer office in Aswan in order to expedite a fast getaway. No matter how many people we asked who seemed to understand us, we received a different answer every time. This was getting us nowhere other than wearing out our shoes and patience. Finally, I accidentally stumbled onto the place which was closed because it was Friday. The weekend in Egypt comprises Friday and Saturday. We should have known. It seems that there was a lot we didn't know.

Anyway, convinced that the ferry was leaving that day and not having received any indication to the contrary, we hired a taxi to take us to Haidam for three dollars.

There was a tiny shed which, for all intents and purposes, was the ticket office. There was quite a crowd milling around it. We tossed coins and I won the privilege of forcing my way to the front and purchasing the means for our escape. After a while one doesn't mind all the jostling and shoving of the screaming hordes. When in Haidam.... and I was becoming a past master at the game. When I did get to the top of the queue (did I say queue!? - does that word exist in the local lexicon?)

I discovered that the first and second-class tickets had long since sold out and third class was all that was left. I had to make a quick decision or get crushed to death by the following masses. Third it would be, which was, as I later mused, a darn sight better than our ancestors, who could only manage to come forth out of Egypt. And god knows we'd already encountered a few plagues of biblical proportions.

Third class is basically basic accommodation - a deck of, what we estimated to be, about fifteen by ten metres - the sort of area that we, way back as uni students, would take up the challenge and try to cram full of bodies to establish a record. It was replete with everything from chickens and goats roaming free to locals and backpackers. It was sometimes hard to tell the difference. It was essential to establish one's territory early on because that's where the next three days and two nights would be spent. It had to be an area large enough to accommodate a sleeping bag and the rest of one's possessions. We also figured

there were close to one hundred and fifty other souls with whom we would spend our time. It was unlike every other cruise I had ever taken, although years later whilst travelling between Tunis and Sicily, some of the fragrances were redolent of that time.

Just as I was wondering where the toilet was, I became imperative that I found it - synchronicity again working in mysterious ways. At night there would have been no problem. That was simply a matter of aiming or squatting over the side. The daytime convenience, on the other hand (and it's crucial to remember which hand is which in these parts), was inconveniently situated below deck in the second-class section. Getting there was a feat in itself. Second class was a collection of about half a dozen rooms which could accommodate as many people as could fit in, also ideal for university students.

The stench that permeated the corridor leading to the W.C. provided no doubt as to where one was headed. It was so overwhelming that I swear most second-class passengers also used the outdoor facilities under the cover of darkness rather than the rapidly deteriorating state of their designated facilities. And I'd always wondered what the term 'poop deck' meant! Fortunately, the lomotil worked and I needed only to venture below decks on that singular occasion.

We were camped next to a group of Danish students who I first thought were suffering from some unusual variety of throat disease until I realised they were speaking their own dialect. I guess it could have been worse - it could have been Dutch! Actually, I've always found both groups well met on the road, but their languages...!

They chattered away, full of bonhomie and whatever else they were devouring, well into the evening.

The boys and I spent the late afternoon reading. I was making heavy weather of *Moby Dick* (Herman Melville would have to be one of the last people I would ever invite to dinner - talk about soporific!) I picked up a *Time* magazine Steve had brought with him but he snatched it off me claiming that he preferred to read magazines that had not yet lost their virginity. I was about to add a rejoinder but thought better of it.

It seemed the whole deck had fallen asleep by about ten except for me. It was damned hard trying to sleep on those boards. I just couldn't get comfortable no matter which way I lay. There was only one option left. I dropped a mandy at about eleven and, since I'd eaten nothing more than a bread roll for the evening repast, it wasn't long before I, too, had joined my journeymen in spirit.

I can't account for anything until about two o'clock when the right foot of the lad who was hitherto sleeping next to me found its way into the side of my head. I was in the process of remonstrating when I further noticed he was leaning over the side spewing his heart out. Telling him that I strongly disapproved of his behaviour was going to be neither warmly received nor particularly constructive given the circumstances. The mandy still had me in its clutches and I drifted back to sleep dreaming of five-star hotels, banquets and Ferrero Rochers.

At five, strange sounds disturbed my unconsciousness. Half the people on deck and a few other vertebrates were facing Mecca and proceeding through their morning incantations. During this time the boat had drifted somewhat so that by the time they were finished they were facing Nairobi.

XVI - ATHEISM

A NON-PROPHET ORGANISATION

Faith, indeed, comes from within. Now, the thing about prayer: obviously, it must give some solace to those involved unless they're scared not to pray; hedging their bets. But there's something I don't get. I was raised, for the first thirteen years of my life in a liberal Jewish household. We were nominal Jews who might visit a synagogue a couple of times a year without a great deal of conviction. My religious education took place at Sunday school and, at the time, I was quite taken by, and immersed in it. So much so that I managed to top the class. Just ask Alan Jacobs. But soon after that I began to fall out.

Still on a personal level, my religious experience probably began around the age of three or four when I started to understand concepts. It stopped around my early teens. It goes to my awareness of the Latin term *tabula rasa* which can be traced to the writings of Aristotle and continues through the ages to John Locke in the Seventeenth Century who expounded on it further in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The human mind is, at birth, a "blank slate" with no rules for processing data, and that data or information is accreted to, and the rules for processing it, solely by one's sensory experiences.

My point being, that one is not born a Christian, a Jew, a Moslem, a Hindu or any other of the 2,000 or so religions that plague (my take) the world. Religion is predicated by the family, or community, or country into which one is born. So that the same child, born with its blank slate, could find itself an adherent of the religion according to where it was born. So, religion is not a product of birth, but rather one of inculcation.

I have, for many years, been a keen student of history, Jewish history in particular. So my question is this: given the story of the Jews, back through the Babylonian times, the Greek and Roman periods, the early Christian times, The Crusades, The Middle Ages, The Spanish Inquisition, the pogroms in Russia and elsewhere, The Holocaust and the general collective subconscious of western civilisation as well as that in the Middle East that keeps the fires of Anti-Semitism always burning, what good have all the prayers achieved? How much worse could it get if the Jews didn't pray?

Mark Twain got it right when he posited that if one prays long enough for the rains and floods to stop, they will. And if one prays hard and long enough for the rains to come and ease the drought, they'll do that too. And if one doesn't do anything, the same will still happen. Just imagine!

Now, some of the greatest minds in Western Civilisation, Spinoza, without whom the Enlightenment would have been waiting decades in the wings and for which the world of Islam is still awaiting, Marx, Freud, Einstein and the list goes on, why did they remain simply cultural Jews at best, eschewing their religiosity? I think I understand the answer.

The Jews have always carried with them an intellectual tradition. Indeed, that was often all they could take with them as they were expelled from so many countries as well as being banned from many occupations. They represent only a steady 0.3% of the world's population which is rising annually by 1.4%, yet they have managed to garner 22% of all the Nobel Prizes. One thinks the intellectual landscape would be much poorer if they didn't exist. Just think, excluding science and medicine, and on a superficial level, of the world of music, entertainment and literature of over the last 100 years.

So you can see, dear reader, that I'm not a great fan of religion. When one thinks of the Thirty Years' War which engulfed most of Europe in the Seventeenth Century, the Irish Troubles (nice euphemism), the Sunni/Shia divide that racks the Middle East and countless other conflicts predicated along religious lines, one may indeed question the value of religion at all. Communism was supposed to provide an answer by abolishing Marx's "opium of the masses", but look what happened there; Stalin - 50 million deaths, Mao - 40 million, Pol Pot - a quarter of Cambodia's population. So between religion, plague and political ideology, the population of the human race has been kept well in check.

Now, here's a thought. What if one visited Northern Ireland or The Middle East or the Balkan Peninsula or, well, take your pick, and made all the people in each destination, dress the same? They'd each share a common gene pool. Now let's introduce hate. That might be a little difficult unless we started to differentiate people. A good way to do that would be to give them

a frame of reference so that tribalism could flourish. Religion would satisfy that requirement. We could have, say, Protestant versus Catholic, Sunni versus Shia versus Jew, and Serbian/Russian Orthodox versus Catholic. Of course, we could visit so many other places and introduce religion with the same result: conflict leading to hatred, or hatred leading to conflict. And all this leads to intergenerational trauma which, seemingly, doesn't seem to dissipate quickly enough, if at all. Racial differences would, and has, led to the same result.

XVII - MEANWHILE, BACK ON BOARD

I was aching from whatever position I must have ended up in. Any further thoughts of sleep were quickly abandoned and I sat up to gaze around at any number of infidels, they being fellow travellers, the non-believers, in the lands of the Prophet, whose faces I hoped looked worse than mine although I had serious doubts.

Coffee was available across the deck. It was that incredibly rich blend mixed with condensed milk making surprisingly not an unpalatable concoction. It cost only a few coins so I indulged myself with another. What with the invasion of the caffeine and the vestiges of the mandy, there must have been an almighty struggle going on somewhere inside me. Can't say that I felt on top of the world.

Breakfast consisted of the rolls and some marmalade we had purchased in Aswan for the trip. The marmalade had to be rationed sparingly since Steve had chosen to sleep with his head on the bag in which it was stored. Consequently, most of that condiment was spread, not on our rolls but over the interior of Steve's daypack. He was not a happy boy.

Nevertheless, there we were with a day and a half to go before disembarking in Wadi Halfa. It was Ancient Mariner stuff; there was little visual relief, the lake being so large that the only break from the water being the distant sandy shoreline. We read for a while before the Danes' antics drove us to distraction. They were really quite harmless - it's just that when one is feeling a trifle seedy, then youthful enthusiasm, no matter how innocent, can be a welcome omission from the agenda.

XVIII - THE DICEMAN COMETH

I'd brought a pocket set of backgammon to while away the time, so Ray and I launched into a tournament that was to encompass nearly a hundred games over the course of the day. At the time when we finally ceased playing

the score was something like Ken sixty and Ray something less than forty. This somewhat rankled Ray. Backgammon can do that to you. He reasoned that his tactics seemed sound enough, and indeed they nearly always were, so how could I account for the lopsided results. It was then that I made a blunder. The reason for my superiority, I posited, was because I was affecting the roll of the dice. Had he heard of psychokinesis? What did he think of my assertion that I could influence the roll of the dice? Naturally as much as he would have liked to accept this rationale for his defeat, to admit that I could do what I claimed would be even more difficult to swallow.

So, since there wasn't a lot on our itinerary for at least the next eighteen hours (six months if you extend this to include social engagements), I proposed that we put it to the test. I was to select a number unbeknown to him and etch it onto a piece of paper which was to be secreted in my pocket until an agreed upon number of trials had taken place. We did this using different numbers which comprised well over a thousand rolls. (Hey! What else was there to do?) My chosen number greeted me at better than one in every five rolls over all those trials, better than the probability of one in six. Whether or not that represents statistical significance I don't know, but Ray, who is not always easy to impress, was certainly left scratching his head (of course this was still early days before the lice had really taken hold).

I'd been fascinated by probability and decision-making for quite some time now. I'd read Luke Rinehart's book *The Dice Man* a number of years earlier and it had had an interesting effect on my life for a few years. One of his theses was that one spends too much time in making decisions and that, by rolling a dice, time would not be wasted on equivocation. I'd often roll the dice to relieve myself of the burden of decision-making.

I remember one night in particular. My friend, Julian, had wandered over, caught in the dilemma as to whom he should invite to the university ball. I asked him who his choices were and because he wasn't committed to anyone and was happy to "play the field", mentioned five girls he would quite happily take with him. You'll need a sixth option, I suggested whilst reaching for the dice. When he couldn't produce girl number six, I proffered the name of Carole, a girl I'd met at uni a few days earlier.

What the hell was I thinking! Here was an intelligent, attractive and effervescent girl and I'm casting her lot into the throw of a dice?! Was I insane? Well, yes. He rolled the dice. And bless my soul if it didn't come up on four, the number we'd assigned to Carole. Then we had to decide when I'd make the introduction. We designated six possible times and again rolled the dice. It came up on "now", that being 1.30am.

So off we drove to the address she'd given me at Kensington, located her unit and tapped gently on the window, so as not to disturb her flatmates. Amazingly, she wasn't fazed by this midnight visit and, after introducing Julian, we chatted for ten minutes or so being heading back into the night, returning to my place. All that was to be done now was to decide the course of events after the ball; was it to be coffee, later supper, a moonlight walk, back to his place for drinks and hopefully a torrid encounter? The dice would decide although secretly I hoped that it wouldn't result in the torrid encounter since I had designs in that direction. Well, wouldn't you know it, but that's what the dice directed and the rest is both history and mystery. I never had the chance to pursue the lovely Carole who, after a few months with my buddy, receded into our collective memories. Carole and I could have been something. Talk about love's labours lost.

XIX - BED AND BORED

The sun turned in quickly and we spent a good few hours watching the stars in their abundance and philosophising. It'd been a long time since *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Heart of Darkness* had such exposure. They both conjured up images which seemed quite cogent right now. I could think of worse things to do.

We eagerly devoured the remainder of our food which by now consisted of what was left in our water bottles and some leftover bread. The inside of Steve's daypack was looking tastier by the minute. It was not a pretty sight, but then the contents of Steve's receptacles were never for the faint hearted. We also bought some sardines from a street stall in Haidam but couldn't get the bloody can open which was probably just as well since none of us liked sardines anyway. At least they'd stay fresh. It's always lovely to receive a blessing in disguise.

A couple of the locals who had been observing us invited us to join them in a smoke which sadly turned out to be tobacco, although Ray was giving every impression that it packed something a trifle more potent. But then Ray was always a sucker for a good placebo.

At 8.30 the three of us dropped a mandy each and waited. Half an hour later the wait was over and we were well and truly hit. Ray suddenly had an idea - why don't we devise a rugby team and choose it from all the girls we'd slept with over the years? Did he really filter some of the stuff that spilled out of his brain? It was so ridiculous that it didn't seem all bad. Steve could supply the ball girls - just joking! (Another sperm of the moment jibe or is that hitting below the belt?)

So there we lay, under the Egyptian night sky in a state of rapidly encroaching certifiability (now there's a word for your Thesaurus), picking an all-female football team. We'd probably have been better off picking our noses. Nevertheless, it kept us occupied and amused. Ray's women provided the forwards and mine the backs in the more-sprightly sphere of the game. I wonder if that says anything. And more to the point, does it really matter? How flattered they would be to learn the images we were conjuring up of them, for us on this godforsaken night. For the good of all humanity sleep claimed us before we could launch into other flights of insanity and fancy.

Sexist all of this? Probably. But remember, we first exercised our libidos in the mid-sixties and continued exercising them into the late seventies before conjugal considerations intervened. We were products of the zeitgeist in which sexual mores were turned on their heads. The pill can claim a lot of responsibility and credit for this. And having said that, to our credit, I can't remember any of us taking advantage of prospective partners. We were brought up to believe that respect was an integral element in any relationship.

It almost follows that we slept reasonably well.

XX - DO WADI

The morning broke and in the distance, we could see what we later learned was Wadi Halfa, our destination. It was a wonder in itself that craft as flimsy as this made the journey time and time again. It was obviously sturdier than we reckoned. We reckoned this way until about a year later when we read in a newspaper back home that the barge had capsized with a loss of almost the entire passenger complement which at this time was about 400. How prophetic was it that we contemplated what measures we would take if such a thing occurred as we approached Wadi Halfa.

I'm a strong swimmer so I didn't feel under any threat - in fact, had I been able to stay awake for almost the entire length of this trip (which was a distinct possibility without chemical interference), I imagine I'd be able to swim faster than this apparatus and arrive at our destination a lot sooner. I mean, it was hardly the sort of craft one would see water-skiers hanging off. In case of emergency I'd simply swim with my backpack to shore then head back out to give Steve or Ray some assistance. Ray's clothes were more my size than Steve's so I'd probably head towards his pack before turning to Steve's prior to rescuing the lads themselves. I was always one for getting my priorities in order right from the start. Compassion was always my strong suit.

As we approached Wadi, the sight did nothing to enthuse; it was a collection of ramshackle stalls made of tin and a few pieces of timber to give a semblance of stability. The only exception was a small brick construction comprised of a solitary room barely big enough to house a desk and a lone chair; this was the border to Sudan. We docked in a fashion at about 11.30 and proceeded to negotiate an obstacle course over a couple of old launches before setting foot on terra firma. Actually, it was more of terra infirma - mud that wanted to cling onto your shoes like a suction cap.

XXI - HALFA'S MUCH AGAIN

We had arrived in Wadi Halfa which was to become my second favourite place in the world. Every other place was my favourite.

I went to a shack that purported to be a bank and attempted to change the remainder of my Egyptian pounds into their Sudanese counterparts. I was told that this couldn't be done. I explained that the Sudan Embassy in Cairo said that this was okay but still they remained unmoved. What was it going to take to impress these people? Ever since the day I was laughed out of music class at high school after attempting an Al Jolson impression, I've been a little reluctant as well as highly unsuccessful in the art of impressions. Alan Jacobs could probably vouch for that.

And then, after all my beseeching had failed, the guy, sotto voce, offers me 50 Sudanese pounds for my Egyptian ones ignoring the fact that firstly, it was unofficial and probably illegal, and secondly, that the correct exchange rate was closer to 80! This was a bit scary. I was also more than a little pissed off that these guys could get away with this. I informed him that although I appreciated his kind offer, it was best, under the circumstances, to decline. Or words to that effect. I headed back to tell the lads.

The problem remained, however. We had just crossed into Sudan and intended taking the train south to Khartoum and didn't possess the coin of the realm with which to purchase our passage. And then, as if by magic, a local approached me from the back of the "bank" offering the same rate as his cohort did. I was starting to feel a little concerned at the turn of events so, wisely or otherwise, I accepted his offer and returned to Ray and Steve with the filthy lucre, a most apposite description.

XXII - A PASSAGE TO KHARTOUM

The train was due to depart mid-afternoon which is about as accurate as you can get in these parts. Third class was packed with locals whose numbers just about matched those of the Danes with whom they would be sharing the journey. We took one look at the situation and decided tacitly that the comparative luxury of second class had a lot to recommend itself. Second-class was indeed more expensive, about 50% more but what the hell, we paid our three dollars and set off in search of our cabin.

The conductor, is that what they call them? looked at our tickets and directed us back to the third-class carriages. We remonstrated that these were, in fact, second-class but he proved rather obdurate. So back we went to the ticket office to straighten things out. The guy who sold us our tickets wasn't there so I explained to the one who was, just what our problem was. He either didn't understand me or didn't want to. He examined our tickets as if he'd never seen one before and after a few seconds of deliberation said "third class" and that was that.

"We want to buy second class," I told him.

He pushed some forms in my direction and I promptly filled them out, improvising when they became a little baffling. I placed them back on the counter in front of him. "Three American dollar," he demanded without examining the documents. Why do they always speak in singular? And was there really a black market?

I didn't have a three dollar note or a nine dollar one, come to think of it, so I proffered a ten for the three of us, he handed over three tickets which were emblazoned with the number "2", and then decided that he didn't have change either in American or local currency. It was all getting a bit much so I told him "Worry not, wizened bureaucrat. Consider the dollar a token of our esteem and appreciation," or words to that effect. Words were beginning to have a wonderful effect under the tropical sun. I returned with the tickets and we transported ourselves with our packs in the direction of the second-class carriages.

Our tickets were designated unreserved but within a short time we had discovered that the only unoccupied areas in second class were the reserved cabins which, stark as they were, had a certain appeal. We had ensconced ourselves in one such cabin whereupon a guard arrived announcing that when the people for whom the cabin was reserved arrived, we'd have to move. He proceeded further along the train as we frantically scraped off the reserved sign which had been pasted on the wooden frame of our door and commenced our temporary occupation.

Feeling confident that we were the lords of our temporary abode, three coins were tossed to see who'd stand guard while the others went in search of comestibles. I lost.

They'd not been gone more than a few minutes when the rightful occupants of the cabin arrived and since the number on their ticket corresponded precisely to that of the cabin, any argument I could produce was obviously not going to further our cause. I dragged all three packs along the corridor until I found what must have been the very last unoccupied cabin. It, too, carried the reserved sign which I promptly consigned to Ray's pack and bolted the door from the inside. This presented a slight problem in that the only window in the cabin opened onto the opposite side to where the boys had gone. I'd just have to listen to the tell-tale sounds of their bewilderment when they discovered that someone else would be sleeping in their beds that night. Actually, although there was supposedly sleeping space for four, there were only two bench seats.

Steve and Ray returned almost an hour later and eventually found our new quarters after expressing only a little embarrassment at their tardiness, which I found only a little amusing. They deserved it after staying away for so long while I battled to maintain our cabin. Besides, I was starving which didn't help matters. What took them so long, I enquired? They'd stopped for a fish meal and a beer. Delightful! But they'd brought back some food for me - grapefruit, which ranks with my palate just in front of fermenting cumquats, and a paper bag of what they purported was dried tomatoes although after one tentative nibble I felt desiccated cockroaches would have been a more apt description. In fact, they'd bought a kilo of the things at a bargain price! I wonder why they were so cheap? After two days even Steve stopped liking them. They also tried their hand at another can of sardines which looked like, for probably the first time in the history of sardines, topping the popularity stakes. Years later, when I think of that unfortunate meal, the word 'repugnant' still sounds alluring.

XXIII - A NEW TRAIN OF THOUGHT

The train began rolling in the mid-afternoon but not before we beat back a siege on our cabin. A local arrived and asked in Arabic if he could leave his bag in our luggage rack. We could tell it was Arabic because firstly he was dressed in the garb of one who, if he were to open his mouth, Arabic was odds on to come out and, secondly because Ray said it was which cast immediate doubt on supposition number one. We also had a rough idea as to what he was saying because, within a few seconds of ending his soliloquy, he placed his bag in the

luggage rack and walked out. Minutes later he returned with two compatriots and sat down.

Keep in mind there were now six people in a four-berth cabin in what could be a potentially hostile situation. We all three protested rather vigorously until Steve went in search of the inspector. He returned with a little fellow who was as wide as he was high and somehow convinced him that our cabin was for tourists only and since these recent arrivals were from The Sudan, then they didn't qualify as tourists. I suspect they simply got sick and tired of our intransigence and soon after disappeared to encroach upon someone else. And furthermore, is there some sort of commonality between encroachers and cockroaches?

Darkness fell and we went to the dining car in search of light since the lights in the cabins either weren't working or switched on. We remained there until about nine whereupon it must have been more than obvious that we weren't paying customers and we were kicked out. We then sat in the corridor outside first class talking and reading till about midnight.

Ray managed to strike up a conversation of sorts with the cook. He spotted a chicken in the kitchen and remarked to the guy how cute it was to keep a pet to keep him company during the long and arduous journey south or words to that effect. The cook looked at Ray the way one often does at the feeble-minded and drew his finger across his throat indicating just what we might expect to see on our plates if we bothered to splurge and order breakfast. Ray recoiled in horror. Steve and I exchanged weary glances not for the first time. It was definitely past everyone's bedtime.

XXIV - A LABORIOUS BERTH

Now these cabins, although aforementioned as four-berthers, didn't really lend themselves too well to that configuration. There were two softish, vinyl-covered bench seats facing each other and these could accommodate one person each stretched out. Just where the other two persons might lay their weary or otherwise heads was a mystery unworthy of contemplation.

So, with three bodies and, realistically, two beds, we were faced with a dilemma. Our eyes all focussed on the floor in mutual horror. Out came the coins. I'm not really sure how they fell but I do recall that A: Ray didn't lose the toss and B: he ended up unfurling his sleeping bag preparatory to sleeping on the floor. Ray was famous for being able to sleep anywhere, in any position and with anyone but that is an apocryphal story for both another time and those

who inhabited the Sydney suburb of Balmain in the late 80s. So whoever it was who lost the toss, took full advantage of Ray's magnanimity and made ready to sleep on the bench.

At about ten o'clock it was lights out had they been on in the first place. There was no evening banter since we were all pretty exhausted from the day's events. Minutes later there was an almighty shudder from our companion lying supine on the floor. He thought he'd felt a cockroach. Now Ray may be well noted for his magnanimity but this doesn't even come close to his phobic reputation concerning little creatures of the night.

At ten-fifteen all was quiet again. Steve and I were reasonably comfortable on our benches but the same could not be said for Ray who was now contorted into the luggage rack above Steve. It was not a tableau out of Home Beautiful.

Needless to say, Ray enhanced his reputation by falling asleep before either of us did.

I dozed fitfully until about three when the train ground to a halt waking us both (it must be understood that Ray was often harder to rouse than applying a defibrillator to a heart patient).

We weren't at any stop and I could make out nothing on either side of the train. What was accomplished, however, was that the family of three adults and their twenty-seven children (work out that one!) in the next compartment began whingeing and bickering at a decibel level that threatened to send our eardrums into meltdown. Banging on the wall only served to increase the volume. This may have been a case of justifiable homicide had the train not started and the volume next door consequently abated.

I grabbed another couple of hours of broken sleep, too broken to dream, before dawn and even given that, I dare say that I was a darn sight more appealing to the eye than Ray whose skin, as a result of the netting of the luggage rack, was reticulated enough to look like a giraffe's within hours of the mating season having finished. That's Ray's mating season, not that of the giraffe. In fact, Ray didn't possess a mating season; it was open season for him all year round. Come to think of it, I've seen him with the same complexion after a heavy night back home - this also is another story. Boy! Ray's life could be the subject of an embarrassing movie.

XXV DUST TO DUST

It wasn't until we opened the shutters that we fully understood the effects that having no glass in the windows had wrought upon us. Dust had seeped in throughout the night and covered everything with its fine film. Ray was the only one not fully blanketed due to his sleeping position (see above). We could have been transported to Pompeii and passed admirably for those exhibits engulfed by the noxious emissions from Vesuvius. It was so fine that it had permeated everything. Even Steve made a mental note to have a shower before the end of the month!

Poor Steve. The dust was bad enough but he suffered the added twist by being covered with numerous bites of what we decided were bedbugs. (I promised myself never to bid him "goodnight, don't let the bedbugs bite" ever again.) He used almost the entire contents of an aerosol insect spray can on his sleeping bag which was now soaked in repellent mixed with the dust from the desert. He changed his jeans but was caught out in the knickers department because his only other pair was dirty. On both sides. I can't bring myself to talk about his solution to that problem. Suffice it to say that no one was in a hurry to sit with him until after we'd done some laundry in Khartoum.

He began rummaging through his pack in the luggage rack for some cream to stop the itching but succeeded only in disturbing the flimsy paper bag of dried tomatoes which came cascading onto my head. It was also around this time that the tomatoes were ejected from the train.

To make matters worse, he then visited the toilet, always a pleasure on any train, and came back looking even more dejected. I wished him every success as memories of his escapade in Madrid came flooding back. (Flooding?) Perhaps this was not the sort of thing one should take lightly.

The day was basically uneventful. I spent a major part of it riding on the roof with a bunch of Danes who were also trying to escape the oppression of the dust and heat in the cabins. Every so often I would return to the cabin to escape the oppression of the Danes before returning to the roof to continue the cycle. It wasn't easy getting to the roof; one had to scale the scaffolding between the carriages and do a bit of hoisting to complete the task. It wasn't particularly dangerous, more a little awkward. Once on the roof, we could join the twenty or so others who entertained the same desire to escape remaining below. The train was probably travelling at a speed of twenty kms and, since the track barely deviated between Wadi Halfa and Khartoum, this option wasn't an unpleasant one.

The train arrived at Khartoum station at eleven o'clock, thirty-two hours after it left Wadi Halfa. We had made good time, quite short of the fifty-plus hours we'd expected.

XXVI - SILENT NIGHT, NOISY NIGHT

It was Christmas Eve and as we walked away from the station and the surrounding noise in search of a hotel another noise assailed us. Actually, it was not unpleasant at all - a group of carol singers emerged from a side street in a serpentine line of melody and harmony as they slowly ambled in the direction of a church, I imagined. They were indeed a sound for sore ears after the train. The further south in Sudan we travelled, the more evidence of Christianity was noticed. We might, under other circumstances, have followed the entourage but we had a more pressing need.

We weren't experiencing any luck in our quest of a bed for the night. We noticed the Meridien beckoning us from the distance so we turned in that direction. There was no intention of staying there - we simply figured they might be able to give us some advice at what was fast approaching midnight. The receptionist was most obliging and, after making some calls, informed us that the Metro had a room at fifteen dollars. Even though this was way above our budget we decided in favour of it, at least for the night.

Well, after thirty minutes of searching fruitlessly for the Metro we gave up. We unloaded our packs which were now becoming quite a burden and Ray and I guarded them while Steve went in search of accommodation. If that act doesn't tell the reader about our state of mind then... Steve returned twenty minutes later with the joyful tidings that he'd managed to find a room. Relocating the hotel again did prove a minor obstacle, but find it we did and were more than happy to pay the ten-dollar tariff. It wasn't until the next day when we discovered that the hotel was, in fact, around the corner from where Ray and I had waited for Steve while he'd wandered off. Nevertheless, we didn't make a big deal of it. Wasn't it enough that he'd simply, and against all odds, found his way back?

The boys hit the sack while I showered for the first time in four days. The amount of mud that flowed off me was going to do some serious damage to the Nile Delta.

XXVII - KHARTOUM CORNER

We slept until seven when the noise from below wafted into the room. Five hours of reasonable sleep wasn't too bad considering then previous couple of nights.

We found a restaurant of sorts close by and ordered coffee, eggs and bread rolls. There were no bread rolls in all of Khartoum, we were informed with due lamentation (a lamington wouldn't have gone astray) by the maitre-de who actually looked as if he couldn't care one way or the other. There was a flour strike in Khartoum, he explained. This, indeed, left room for contemplation. The coffee was thick enough to eat with a fork and the eggs could have been dispatched with a straw but, hey, things could be worse. It was pleasant sitting in the relative quiet after the jolting experience of the train even if a giant rat did scuttle across the floor eliciting a laxative effect on the lads.

Now, perhaps the most important thing for us to do in Khartoum was to get out and head south into Kenya for an attempt at Kilimanjaro. We left the restaurant nearly upsetting, of all things, a fully-laden cart of bread rolls and made a beeline for the airline offices.

It was Friday and it was Christmas Day - everything that wasn't in a state of disrepair was closed and sometimes the distinction was nebulous. We walked and found The Hilton and despatched a pastry before having second tortes and devouring another.

We also laid eyes upon the confluence of the Blue and White Niles whilst throwing around names such as Kitchener and Gordon. We never missed a chance to show a little erudition.

We returned to the hotel mid-afternoon and rested until early evening before hitting the streets anew in search of comestibles.

The first restaurant had no food and admitted it promptly, which we much appreciated. Lord knows why it was open. It wasn't unknown for us to sit in a place and work our way through a menu before discovering piecemeal that the menu was really a sorry example of wishful thinking rather than an indication of reality.

The second establishment wouldn't change travellers' cheques - we each possessed the equivalent of a few dollars - more than enough for a meal but it was always handy to keep some change just in case.

We found a square not far from the hotel with a few small food booths which all sold the same fare: small but tasty pieces of fried fish, a side salad consisting solely of something that strongly resembled watercress, and fresh guava juice which none of us had hitherto tasted but quickly grew to relish. This cost less than a dollar and it was a meal that we delighted in at least once a day for the next week.

I, for some reason, had a frisbee in my daypack so after the meal Ray and I threw it around for a few minutes before I noticed that Ray's concentration just wasn't with us. He'd spotted two girls sitting quite close to us, one of whom, he confided to me, he was sure was from Sydney and had gone out with him once a few years back. Well, after the Allan Jacobs incident, who was I to question serendipity. What did he have to lose? I encouraged him. Ask her.

No, he wanted to observe her a little longer. So we ordered another guava juice and sat there until Ray could be absolutely certain. He had no intention of making a fool of himself. Ray also possessed selective memory.

Finally, when the last vestige of doubt was removed from his mind, he took a deep breath and negotiated the few metres to where she was sitting. He engaged her in conversation for a few minutes before returning somewhat abashed to our table. Not only was she not the girl he'd been looking for, to make matters worse she didn't understand much English which, was a little strange for a traveller whose native tongue was German. And the fact that she spoke German was enough to make matters even worse. Ray tried to explain himself in German which was more than the poor girl could take. Some sparrows finished off their meal.

XXVIII - LIVING IN A VACUUM MUST REALLY SUCK

What happened over the next few days helped explain for me why the Third World wasn't quickly going to emerge from the mess it was in, any time soon. Not within the next millennium anyway.

We arose early and arrived at the airline office at a little after seven. Two hours later we departed having witnessed a virtuoso performance of bureaucratic incompetence. We had purchased standby tickets for the following day which is a helluva lot of standing by! I mean, if you've got to stand by somewhere, then Khartoum was the place you'd be looking for, right? We needed to return at one-thirty to pick up the tickets. So that's what we did. We couldn't find the guy

who had sold us the tickets so they put us on hold while they discussed amongst themselves lord only knows what. One of the staff then informed us that nothing could be done because the fellow who had all the information had gone home. Now this may have been either fortunate or otherwise for him, but it wasn't particularly reassuring to us especially in the light of the ensuing events.

I put it to him that, what happens if the guy is sick tomorrow or indefinitely? What would happen if he was liquidated by the regime or simply eloped with his second cousin twice removed? No one couldn't enlighten me. So I asked to see the manager who wandered out and greeted us obsequiously, a characteristic I find awfully appealing in staff of this sort. He merely echoed the comments of the other fellow. I pointed out that, since he was in charge of this operation, then he should be able to take over our negotiations. Oh no, he riposted, it would not be proper to assume the absent employee's matters.

The whole thing was starting to become ridiculous (Starting? I'm giving them the benefit of any lingering doubt).

Surely, I continued, the country doesn't stop because the President had gone home or was having a rest? (Was this logic going to get through?) And so the conversation proceeded. After half an hour enough was enough. Well, enough has always been enough, but in this case, it was emphatically so. We promised to return the next day. We could hardly wait.

By way of returning, we made our way back to the hotel and washed some clothes which were sorely in need of such attention. Steve, for some reason didn't do his until Ray and I prevailed upon him that if he held out much longer, he wouldn't be joining us in Nairobi. This seemed to galvanise him into action and, during the next hour or so, he engaged in a desultory form of the aforementioned activity. The stains remained but, to our relief, our olfaction could breathe easy for the first time in days.

It was now past midday and to escape the heat of the afternoon, Ray and I passed the time playing backgammon and rolling the die, while Steve ensconced himself in the lobby, or atrium, of the hotel and read a certain biography of Henry James which provided him with great delight for the next twelve months.

Every so often, when Ray and I became a little bored, we'd throw the tiniest of pebbles over the railing on the top floor onto Steve, two flights below. Of course, we'd retreat so as not to let him know what was occurring. Oh, what fun we had! Was there no limit to our resourcefulness?

XXIX - INSOUCIANT, BUT WHO CARES!

Evening came at about the same time as it did the previous night and quite frankly, the monotony was becoming boring.

By this time, we'd managed to convert some travellers' cheques into local currency and had opted for fish in the square preceded by guava juice.

Following the meal, we decided to treat ourselves to a movie. It's always a treat to do this in a foreign country whose culture was a little dissimilar to ours. Just a little.

The cinema was comprised of deck chairs in various states of disrepair so the fact that we managed to find three together was a testament to our wonderful powers of observation. The movie was one of those mindless B-grade pieces of tripe that has a ready market in this part of the world - one of those action movies that heralded the Rocky's and Rambo's a decade later. Almost entirely monosyllabic, it was a sub-titlist's delight!

The disturbing thing was that there were actually discernible scenes that were genuinely supposed to be funny. They were sight gags, which didn't need translation, and yet the audience remained completely unmoved. What did reduce them into the proverbial paroxysms was the gratuitous violence which obviated the need for any real plot. Make no mistake, the special effects made the violence look pretty real - it was quite horrific and to have an audience responding as if it were part of their daily entertainment diet was a bit of a worry. And this was not your ordinary fisticuff violence. It was limbs being ripped off and the kind of action that would have an emergency room staff in a major hospital reaching for smelling salts. Desensitisation to violence can never be healthy.

We walked back to the hotel in a reflective mood. That is until I nearly disappeared into the sewers as we were in transit. Large slabs of concrete covered the openings to the sewers on the footpath and these weren't always in place as I discovered. From then on we walked on the road. It was far safer walking on the streets of Khartoum than on the footpaths.

XXX - NO NEWS IS NOT UNUSUAL

The next day was somewhat of a non-event. We hit the airlines, early in the morning, at seven-thirty and again at one and once more at five - there was no word. Not from them at least. Oh, we had a few words which diplomacy dictated we hold for another time, probably coupled with some inappropriate gestures.

We wandered in and out of the markets, had our fish and guava juice in the square, wrote postcards, played backgammon and threw small projectiles at Steve who was now a few pages further into Henry James. We also found the Excelsior Hotel which afforded us some lovely views of the city.

XXXI - SO, WHAT ELSE IS NEWS?

The next day, the 28th of December, brought better news. Our flights for the 28th had been confirmed. I waltzed over to the boys and broke the good tidings to them. I walked back over to the counter only to notice the attendant was dating the tickets two days hence, the 30th. (I had taken the precaution of wait-listing us for the Sunday as well as the Friday.) We were told that there were, in fact, seats available for today's flight but it had departed at 5.30 a.m. Then why the hell, I asked, did they tell us to check in early this morning, after they'd opened soon after seven?

It was at this stage that his English started faltering and his incomprehension saved the day for him. Steve called him a stupid bastard telling him that if this happened in Australia there would be a scandal. Steve was longing for a scandal of any description. We had to drag him out of the place. At least we had tickets out on Sunday.

We found ourselves back in the square for lunch. And by Jiminy, who was there but the two girls Ray had accosted a couple of days earlier! Ray must have told them we were leaving and they'd obviously considered it safe to come out. Well, well, well! They wouldn't be making that mistake again.

This time we all walked over to them and exchanged some pleasantries. It seems that they'd been studying an English phrase book and were progressing remarkably well for two who had only a few words at their disposal two days prior. I refrained from complimenting them on their achievement settling instead for the banter of the road.

Steve left after about half an hour suggesting we might see them tonight and I left after another ten minutes leaving Ray to sort out the arrangements. Now, one would expect that experience, being the teacher that it is, would have many disciples. But such is not the case. It would be reasonable to imagine that, having witnessed Ray's rebuttal by the girl such a short time ago, one would be somewhat reluctant to give him the task of arranging an assignation of any sort, let alone one with a romantic bent. But leave him to carry out the task, we did.

Ray returned to the hotel soon after complaining that he was getting the wrong vibes and that to pursue the matter may well lead to failure. So hit me over the head with a blunt instrument and poke sharp ones into my orifices! When will we ever learn and, more to the point, where have all the flowers gone? Really! This was the guy who had tried to tell the same damsels that we were thinking of visiting Ombudsman, which may seem innocuous in itself, but when one realises that the name of the market town was really called Omdurman, then some sort of insight into the lack of wisdom in choosing him to carry out the assignation, may be achieved. Mrs. Malaprop may well be dead and buried but at least her lineage was assured another generation.

So we ate alone in a restaurant called The Sahara. Damned creative, don't you think, to name their establishment thus! I ordered chicken but sent it back when I noticed there was no meat on the bones - poulet anorexia may be popular here but it wasn't doing a lot for my taste buds. We also ordered chips and tea but encountered problems with that as well. In fact, our attendant gave a whole new meaning to the term 'dumb waiter'.

We retired early without ado. The last thing I could remember was falling asleep whilst listening to Ray and Steve discuss and compare their perversions. Incredible ain't it! It was a wonder I could fall asleep at all given the way the conversation was tending!

XXXII - ENOUGH ALREADY WITH THE WAITING GAME

We were awakened early, if that's what you call 5.30 by someone arguing in the hall outside our room. Tempers were running high so we rode out the storm without interrupting it. I guess we all possessed a certain fondness of living.

Our passports needed stamping. Now this should be a simple process but here, no way. We had to present our passports in one office and then spend ten minutes walking to another office to buy a stamp before returning to the original place to have it franked. Africa seems to work that way. "Insanity takes its toll - please have the correct change." Say no more.

And then, for some reason, maybe not even known to the lad himself, Steve had us in a taxi bound for the university. It was infuriating because every time Steve and I travelled he had us visiting the local uni in search of women although, apart from seeing overwhelming evidence of their existence, that was always as far as it went. Maybe we needed to make some veiled promises. We

paid the cabbie fifty piastres but he demanded a pound. We walked away but the way he kept dogging us and hounding us for the extra fifty, no wonder he needed a pound! He must have followed us for ten minutes before giving up and disappearing. Ten minutes later we, too gave up and caught another taxi back to the hotel for seventy-five piastres.

Sat around the hotel playing backgammon and reading until six whereupon we left for the airport and another bout of bargaining and disagreement with a taxi driver. Strangely enough it was a profession with which we never did establish much of a rapport during this trip.

Once we arrived at the airport a guard decided against letting us in to the terminal. We stood there and argued for a good five minutes not understanding what he was on about and I'm sure it was reciprocated before he stood aside and let us pass. We had no idea what had transpired but since we were where we wanted to be, what the hell!

Our luggage was accepted without a fuss and, when I asked what time the plane would be boarding, I was told 4.30. (That's a.m.) How could that be, I inquired, when our ticket stated 1.30. Oh, that refers to Greenwich Mean Time, came the reply. Quick, hand me a selection of blunt and sharp instruments please, I'm going to need them. What was the point of saying anything! At least the plane was going to get us out of this place. Although I did wonder if the year 1979 that was printed on the ticket was from the Gregorian Calendar. I was afraid to ask.

It was getting late and we hadn't eaten for some time. There was a restaurant in the terminal so we wasted no time. The food was really going to be special, we could just tell. After all, name another airport restaurant in the world that you actually have to pay to enter! I've been to many where I would have paid to leave had I known what was in store for me. So we paid the tariff and went in. (Steve had quickly shot off back to the departure desk and ascertained that the flight was in fact, leaving at 1.30.)

The menu wasn't extensive to say the least and by a process of elimination we discovered that some of the items listed were actually available. We ordered our food as well as coffee to wash down the remaining crumbs should they exist. Unfortunately, coffee, we were informed, was not available. Why were we not surprised? And why were we not surprised when a duo seated next to us ordered coffee and were served with the same, and promptly at that? Why was I beginning to feel paranoid and why was everyone looking at me and talking about me?

Ray was feeling equally persecuted. "They must all hate us," he muttered.

"That's not true" I responded in a conciliatory gesture. "Not everybody knows us yet."

Ray saw fit to ignore that comment.

Steve asked one of the coffee drinkers what was the key to getting coffee and he replied in perfect English that neither rhyme nor reason dictated the behaviour in this place. Convincing, we didn't need.

We continued to chat with him. He was a native of Sudan who travelled often. He related the story that IATA, once having seen Khartoum International Airport, had demanded the word "International" removed. "Provincial" would have flattered the place.

Ray started complaining about stomach cramps. We weren't sure whether he had them or wasn't particularly crazy about the concept (Ray could be like that). So we sympathised with him just in case. He spent the next half hour in the toilet also just in case. He was rapidly talking himself into a sorry state - that is, until he emplaned (damned Yanks!) and found himself sitting next to a not unattractive female traveller whereupon he put his ailment to one side and talked to her non-stop for the rest of the three-hour ordeal. It was obvious she wasn't in his thrall - her body language was speaking loud and clear; unfortunately, Ray wasn't fluent in body language. I guess his conversation was just another of Mother Nature's birth controls which had placed a temporary pause on his reproductive imperative. Ray was later to father five children.

XXXIII - IF ONLY TO HAVE A CHAPTER HEADING LONGER THAN THE CONTENTS OF THE CHAPTER ITSELF.

We touched down in Nairobi at about five in the morning.

TWO

INNOCENTS ABROAD

I - NIGHT IN SHINING AMOUR

I finished my meal, bid my companions a perfunctory “good evening” and walked towards the centre of Nairobi without purpose other than seeking the cathartic experience of anonymity in a crowd. Ray and Steve continued on their way.

We’d just arrived in Nairobi, having caught the midnight flight from Khartoum. As exhausted as we were through the day, it was too early to turn in for the night and decided a quick meal was in order. As I meandered past *The Hotel Ambassadeur* two women appeared and unhesitatingly approached me. They were both very dark and it wasn’t until the taller of the two was standing almost on top of me that I could see her features with any definition. Her friend preferred to remain some distance away.

My initial response was one of bemusement. My mind was absorbed by another time, engulfed by the loneliness that dominated my stay here almost three years ago. Back then I was travelling overland to London from South Africa, but by the time I reached Kenya the thought of being away from my wife of three months became too much and I decided to fly to England to meet up with her and continue our travels together.

Now, three years later I was by myself, a single man again, in search of whatever came my way. I imagine the reader might suspect what was afoot. I, at this stage, was clueless.

“Hello” she smiled, revealing a set of ivory that would have made a Steinway envious. From behind her smile emanated a hint of alcohol that subtly brushed my face.

We quickly and light-footedly danced our way through the usual repartee when boy meets girl (at this stage I still hadn’t suspected her meretricious predilection). She placed her hand on my wrist and moved still closer. I felt her naked arm, cool like marble on a summer night. Maybe she likes me, I thought presumptuously. Naivety has no bounds.

“Maybe you would like to spend the night with me?” she asked.

“Well, er, yes, maybe I would” - this was one cool dude she was dealing with. By now the penny was dropping - slowly, but dropping nevertheless. Is this what I wanted? Could I afford it? How would I feel tomorrow morning? What is the capital of Iceland? In what year did the Titanic sink? These and other questions raced through my mind as I stood there. Unfortunately, the only answer forthcoming was Reykjavik and this, I surmised, would be of little significance to anyone at this juncture.

I had to weigh the pros and cons carefully. This was not a decision I could treat lightly. Well, I stood there equivocating (something I rarely do in public) for what seemed like microseconds. “Okay,” I said with diplomatic hesitation. “But how much?” (Always the tactician). I must also add that we three amigos, in all our travels together, hadn’t encountered anything as we were all about to. We certainly were the proverbial innocents abroad.

“I have not asked for money” she replied looking hurt. “I like you.”

That’s an answer! I thought.

“So,” she waved, dismissing her friend. “Let’s go to your place. Where are you staying?”

Tempted as I was to say *The Nairobi Hilton*, I knew deep down that I couldn’t live a lie. “*The Hotel Gloria*,” I ejaculated in a burst of honesty. A hint of recognition flickered in her eyes. My room had a worn vinyl matting which exposed the floorboards, and three beds constructed of bamboo giving one more than a fleeting impression that they were in imminent danger of collapse. The room made the bedroom in Van Gogh’s painting of the same look like he was the one residing in the Hilton.

Light from the street shone directly into the room impeded by neither the occasional pane of dirt-encrusted glass nor the tattered curtains that dangled unceremoniously from hooks driven without contrivance into the cement-rendered wall. The cacophony of the traffic below was one that remains constant throughout the night. This room, I reasoned, did not lend itself with any degree of ardour to the passion that threatened to burst forth at any moment. Be still my heart, I implored myself.

“Well,” I demurred. “Perhaps it would be better if we went somewhere else. I’m sharing the room with two colleagues.” I was hoping that might sound impressive.

“Okay, we can go to my place. We’ll have to take a taxi.”

“How much will it cost?” I inquired hesitantly. “I don’t have much money.” I figured that, under the circumstances, that was a pretty smart thing to say (sooner or later I usually think of something smart to say. Mostly it’s later and in retrospect). After all, if she did ask for money at some stage (ever the optimist), then I at least I’d mentioned my impecuniosity.

“About twenty shillings.” Christ! That was about three dollars which in Kenya could get you a long way. In fact, it could probably get you into Tanzania.

“Why not,” I agreed in a fit of extravagance. “But first let me leave a note at the hotel for my friends. I don’t want them to worry.” (Poor dears).

The hotel was two blocks away and we walked arm in arm in that direction, she making small talk in her halting English. Humming the refrain from *Love For Sale*, I climbed the stairs while she waited below. I quickly stashed my travellers’ cheques into an unlikely place. I left the note for the boys: “Dear Chaps. There is every likelihood of my being engaged in a penetrating cultural exchange this evening. As there is also a great probability of my being up most of the night, please don’t wait up for me. Tooty pips - K.”

I descended the stairs and found her waiting, leaning against a rail, trying to light a match on a worn box. How striking, I mused.

We began walking towards the corner when she looked at me, wide-eyed but practised. “Perhaps you can give me some pocket money?” (Here’s the rub).

“Maybe. How much?” I replied somewhat piqued.

“One hundred and fifty shillings.” Jesus! That was about twenty bucks. Hell, I’ve masturbated for less!

We haggled for a few minutes and finally, because she “really did like me”, she’d do it for a hundred. No, let’s rephrase that: she’d do it for nothing but accept the money as a gift. (Her accountant was really on the ball).

II – UP, UP (WELL, SORT OF) – AND AWAY

She hailed a taxi and we drove off the bitumen onto a series of potholed tracks for about fifteen minutes before pulling over to a small bar. She was clearly in charge. “Can you give me some money for beer?” This was not a question. Obediently I reached into my pocket and produced a twenty-shilling note, which she grabbed and scurried over to the pub. Five minutes later she returned with six beers and no change.

Another five minutes passed before we found ourselves outside a small complex of government apartments. “Do you have a shilling to buy a candle?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, I can go the distance,” I riposted. Well, for a hundred shillings I wasn’t going to blow it just like that! (and I’m not referring to the candle).

“There is no light in my room,” she looked at me perplexed by my last statement.

“Sorry, I’ve got no change.” Fantastic! I’d just saved a whole shilling. She’d cost me a hundred, the taxi twenty, the beers twenty, and now it was time to show her who was boss. She had to learn that I couldn’t be taken advantage of easily.

She bought the candle herself and we climbed the stairs. God! It made the Gloria look like The Taj Mahal. It measured about ten feet by ten. The ceiling was corrugated tin and the walls were so thin you could hear the mosquitoes massing on the other side waiting to attack.

We sat there drinking and talking for maybe half-an-hour or so trying desperately hard not to look bored. My attempts were obviously transparent because she soon remarked that I looked tired and maybe I’d like to hop into bed for a nap. (Exciting isn’t it? OK, not so exciting.) She, however, was not tired and on cue to get this over with, I disrobed and reclined on the bed.

I was actually fearful that I would doze off - I had to remain awake because the way she was glancing intermittently at my shoulder bag was making me feel uneasy. I mean, all it contained was about thirty dollars in cash, but I’d made the mistake of leaving my passport in it and the thought of losing this was rather sobering. There was no way that I was going to take my eyes off that bag, which might prove a little difficult given the circumstances. Besides, I had already drunk two of my three beers and this, compounded by the hefty meal I’d finished not long before, contributed to the fact that I had a pressing engagement with the

WC situated in the rear (of the flat, silly!). As the pressure mounted, I wondered how this would affect my libido.

Not that I would suggest that she was setting the stage for raptures divine. After the first drop of amber fluid splashed against her uvula, she started burping unabated and unabashed. To make matters worse, when I chanced to look her way, she had her right index finger firmly entrenched in the corresponding nostril. On the second of such instances I jibed “Wave when you reach the bridge,” but it obviously went over her head.

So the scene was set in exotic Nairobi: a dingy room fabricated from rejected ghetto material, two people who had just failed miserably in verbal communication, me with a bladder nigh on bursting, and her sitting there contentedly burping and exploring the contents of her nose. What more could a man want?

Her finger must have been getting tired because she withdrew it and, looking temptingly at her left hand, thought better of it and began undressing. I tried to observe but the candle didn't afford much light and I was left to speculate whether or not she actually removed her panty hose (they were skin colour). Maybe she's left them on, I pondered. That'd make a bloody good contraceptive. The only article she did leave on, I could tell, was a white bandanna that completely enveloped her hair not allowing even a wisp to escape. On reflection I'm not even sure she had any eyebrows - she could have been bald for all I knew, or worse, maybe she possessed some rare tropical strain of dermatitis or alopecia. I'll never know - at least I hoped not.

Flinging the bedclothes back she snuggled in beside me. I responded with a silent fart (oh the romance and the relief!). And to think that two days ago I was besieged with diarrhoea. Now I'm farting - if that isn't confidence then I don't know what is.

She began exploring my body with her left hand (thank God!). Well, her exploration was confined to an area of about two square centimetres or so. No, better make that ten. Wait, change that to twenty. Actually, I jest - she was having no effect on me whatsoever. After a while she stopped.

“I must ask a favour of you,” she almost whispered.

“Fire,” I replied. (I sure as hell wasn't).

“Can you help me out with some money for a deposit on the electricity?”

“Wait a minute! What do you think this is?” (It's hard to believe that I asked questions like this). I've already agreed to a hundred shillings and now you want more?”

“You don't have to but I beg of you.” (Oh, the pathos!)

This was incredible. I was starting to find the whole thing rather distasteful (I possess finely-tuned powers of perception). This time my resolve strengthened. After all, it was only out of a perverted sense of insouciance and recklessness that I was here in the first place. It wasn't as if I'd been walking around with an erection - witnesses will attest that I was completely alone.

We haggled anew until she finally agreed that I didn't have to give the extra money but she wanted the original fee up front (bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase). I preferred to give her fifty now and fifty later but she remained adamant that she subscribed to the “pay now, come later” plan. Out of exasperation I gave her the hundred so she could concentrate on the business at hand.

She recommenced her foreplay. I lay there, entirely divorced from the proceedings, looking for something to do with my free hand (she was lying on the other). I found myself playing distractedly with her left nipple the way one twiddles certain objects when bored. Five minutes later I felt the first tingling. Probably just stirring out of ennui, I conjectured. She seemed relieved.

With her other hand she reached into her bag and produced three blue condoms. If it was a party she wanted, then I was prepared to inflate them but there was no way that I was going to wear one of those anaesthetisers. Remember that this was 1979, two years before the world would know about AIDS.

“I'm sorry, blue's not my colour. I won't wear them,” I remonstrated. Surprisingly she accepted with merely a sigh of resignation. I guess she could see that this time I would stand firm - well most of me anyway, because at that moment I had a sense of impending loss. With due alacrity I extricated my arm and positioned myself for a full-frontal attack. After on brief incursion, a strategic withdrawal was effected, and the whole exercise came to nought.

By this stage, having decided that nothing would come of nothing, curiosity having long been extinguished, my thoughts turned to leaving, withdrawal assuming the theme of the night. It seemed that there were no buses at this time of the night and, not being a Mecca for nightlife, didn't seem to be a feature either. However, when I offered her ten shillings to produce one, she raced outside and seconds later I heard the unmistakable sound of a vehicle screeching to a halt just outside the door.

As the taxi pulled away, I felt a palpable sense of relief, but I had little doubt that, under the tropic sun, my trousers would dry out within a short time the next day.

III - TALES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

I reached the hotel an hour after midnight expecting to find my travelling companions, Ray and Steve, ensconced comfortably in their beds and in the Land of Nod. The key wasn't in reception so I was baffled when there was no response to my knocking. I returned to the lobby whereupon the concierge informed me that they had come back some time ago only to leave again shortly after. At this hour I had no idea where they might be.

I headed in the direction of The New Stanley, a favoured watering hole, on the off chance that they'd lingered there after a coffee, Steve being an habitu  of such places. The New Stanley was deserted except for an extremely comely wench who seemed to materialise out of nowhere (which is where they usually materialise from) and started propositioning me - what fatal charm did I possess? (All written answers extolling my virtues will be considered). Briefly I explained that I wasn't interested, but she was, and she persevered. I then told her that I'd just been with one of her friends (in the biblical sense) to which she replied that the night was still young. My heart, nor any part of my anatomy, wasn't in it, so I excused myself.

I began wandering disconsolately back to the hotel when I came upon Steve gazing at the display case of a bookshop which had close for the night. Ray was nowhere to be seen. It seems that the two of them had been for their postprandial promenade when a scarlet lady (actually she was more of a Mocha Kenya colour) had confronted Ray, and although he had initially shown a great deal of restraint, within seconds was observed being led away with a spring in his gait and a sparkle in his eye that had not been seen for many a day. Once more he had ascended the springboard for his dive into moral turpitude.

That left Steve pondering the vicissitudes of travel and while wandering through the streets philosophising as is his wont, stumbled upon the bookshop at which I now found him. If there was a bookshop around, then Steve would find it. Although he was a lawyer, he had probably missed his calling; he loved fine literature. A few years later, he would take a sabbatical and move to Seattle for a year to study American literature.

Having presented him with a favourably embellished resume of my earlier activities, I quickly persuaded him to return to The New Stanley and seek his fortune with the maiden I'd left not ten minutes earlier.

Unfortunately, the street was deserted but fate had not finished with him yet. Walking in the opposite direction (still forward though) we heard footsteps.

They were approaching and bringing a body with them, no less. There was no doubting her intention, and as she drew level with us, I paused, ostensibly to peer into a shop window, while they walked a few paces ahead. I then resumed my pace, remaining about two or three metres behind but being careful not to be out of earshot.

She was arguably the most stunning looking woman I had so far seen in Nairobi. Her darkness was that of finely polished ebony and beneath the dark flowing robes which adorned her, I could discern a lithe yet ample body obviously moulded to suit her occupational proclivities. Steve was on a winner, but why were they taking so long to reach an agreement? He'd gotten the price down from three to two hundred, but whereas she wanted to take a taxi to the hotel, Steve preferred to complete the journey on foot - God knows why. Maybe he needed all the strength he could summon. Look, he wasn't getting any younger. Besides, the fare couldn't have been more than a few shillings anyway.

But principles are principles, no matter what the personal cost, he would later aver. I've also heard him make that statement after refusing to buy some food, the price of which he considered exorbitant, and consequently not eating at all; needless to say, the saliva that moistened his lips as he watched me devour my "expensive" little morsels, was tinged with more than a mote of regret.

So, where were we? After settling on a price but failing to come to terms with the taxi situation, he stopped walking and she continued on.

"What's the problem?" I asked innocently.

"She wants to catch a taxi and I refuse."

"Come on mate," I remonstrated. "You're only looking at a few more dollars at the outside in order to get to the inside. Do you want it or not?" By this time the girl had progressed almost a block down the street and by the time his libido was rekindled (actually, it was always on a low flame), and he had scampered up to her, they were far enough from the hotel to warrant a taxi.

I shared the taxi to the hotel and I left them in the lobby negotiating a room. Thinking, or rather, hoping I had seen the last of them for the evening, I undressed, after first returning to the room, and prepared to get into bed. As I did so I heard a knock on the door.

"Who's there?" I snapped, annoyed that someone could be bothering me at this time of the night.

"It's me, Steve," came the plaintive reply.

I opened the door, covering my nakedness with a towel, to find the two of them standing there, obsequiousness gracing their faces.

“There’s a problem.” he began matter-of-factly. “The room we were given doesn’t have a toilet.”

“It’s fucking criminal sport. I’ll keep it in mind.” I made to close the door.

“Well actually,” he quickly added, “she says she wants one in the room. How about swapping rooms?”

“Take the bloody room. All I want is some sleep.” Congeniality was never my strong point at this time of night.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“And Steve.”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck off!” There, I’d said it. The ineffable had been effed!

IV - NO TUNNEL AT THE END OF THE LIGHT

I gathered a minimum of belongings and trudged wearily down the corridor to the other room. Switching on the light something dawned on me. There was no light. Left in the dark again. Still, at least I could get some sleep.

Less than a minute after closing my eyes and before sleep had a chance to get me in its grip (that’s twice in one night) there was another knock on the door. In fact, it wasn’t even another one - it was the same knock!

“Now what!” I shouted, coming to the boil. (Where’s a lancet when you need one?).

“Boy, am I glad to see you’re still awake.” Boy, was he one short of a majority! “I just tried to get her down to a hundred and fifty but she refused. Now she’s gone.”

“Good, now we can both get some sleep.”

“There’s only one small problem. You have to come back to the room otherwise I’m up for the cost of both.”

“And I’m up for justifiable homicide.” I got out of bed in a controlled rage, picked up my things anew and made my way back to the room without a word (I

figured I could go back and retrieve that in the morning). As I reached the room I noticed, standing quietly on the stairs opposite, the girl. Steve, who followed close behind, saw her at the same time. He whisked me aside and bid me wait. I silently did his bidding.

After a hasty conference with her, he returned to me and, with a palliative shrug and a conciliatory grin, asked me if I wouldn’t mind going back to the other room. Suppressing my fury, I once more trekked the corridor, entered the room and with deliberation, bolted the door securely and slid the wardrobe across in case the bolt failed. It was now 2.30.

Sleep didn’t come easily, like many things that night. But after finally achieving that desired state a faint glimmer of light in the morning sky heralded a rather sharp rapping on my chamber door. (“ ‘tis a visitor” I muttered. “Only that and nothing more.” I was raven mad.)

“Piss off Steve! If you can’t conduct your nefarious nocturnes without disturbing me, then that’s tough!” I bellowed. (I can’t tell you how long I’d waited to say “nefarious nocturnes” and now that I’d done so, it really didn’t sound as if it was worth the wait.)

The perplexed voice that slunk its way under the door did not belong to Steve. I sprang out of bed and unlocked the door to find the hotel boy with my breakfast tray and a bewildered expression on his face. Feigning fatigue, I relieved him of his burden and sat down to try and focus on the subject at hand. Cold eggs, sour pineapple and limp toast. And for this I’d been roused!

An hour later I was back in my original room attending to my ablutions while Steve and his companion (never did catch her name) attended theirs. If they were embarrassed then I remained oblivious.

She departed shortly afterwards, leaving a tiny solitary silver glitter star - one of a constellation that adorned her left cheekbone. A little like the Lone Ranger leaving a silver bullet. I said a little. She also left an experience for Steve which he related to me and now, with literary licence and without scruples, I relate to the reader.

V - AN INCONSUMMATE CONSUMMATION

So, this is Steve’s story. After the initial confusion over the rooms and whether she would actually stay at all, they found themselves alone at last. Just the two of them to share the bliss the next few hours should undoubtedly bring.

But how to get started? What for openers?

Steve sat there, confident in his lack of confidence that she would lead the way. After all, she had danced to this music before, while he was a mere novice, a tyro in such matters of the flesh. She was the pro.

It therefore came as a surprise to me to learn that he sat there completely immobile as she did the same. "This just doesn't add up," he thought to himself nonplussed. Her glibness and self-assurance so manifest in the street were now reduced to a shy apprehensiveness reminding one of a puppy, who, after incessantly chasing cars with great bravado, finally catches one.

What could Steve, or anyone, do in such a situation but take the bull by the horns and brazen his way through with no apparent trepidation. After all, his equipose had been completely shattered by this adverse turn of events. Having already paid his account he had nothing to lose.

"I'm going to take a quick shower," was his opening line - after all, it was Sunday already and every Sunday without fail... "Would you like to take one also?" He was only trying to break the ice but she interpreted it differently "We African girls are always clean!" she snapped, obviously offended by this damp squib. He had hoped for a more auspicious beginning but no matter, he could think of a few plays while standing beneath the rusty tepid trickle of the shower.

He began to undress when she suggested that he help her remove her footwear. She wore black knee-high boots that tightly hugged her legs (lucky boots). His first attempts were completely futile. They clung like limpets in a hurricane. There was only one way to do it. She sat on the bed with her right leg extended in front of her. This leg Steve straddled, his back facing her. To the front-on observer, had one been present, our hero could be seen in the throes of struggling to extricate what to all appearances was a strange-looking codpiece. To those who know Steve, they wouldn't have batted an eyelid.

Her other foot, while all this was going on, or off, was placed firmly on his left buttock only too eager to supply the necessary thrust as it was required. Having accomplished this unbecoming but essential function (she was also wearing panty hose), he then proceeded to shower, totally fazed by the surrealistic gossamer that was fast encasing him.

When he returned, she was sitting on the edge of the bed, naked except for a diaphanous black negligée. Things were certainly looking up, thought our hero. He quickly hopped into bed thinking she would slide in beside him, but to his further astonishment she remained almost catatonic.

This was amazing! She actually had to be cajoled into getting under the bedclothes. And when she finally did so, her negligée still had not been removed. So, what to do? Was Steve to seduce a prostitute? To say he was unprepared for this is no small understatement. She was supposed to be experienced. Why, in the street she was the paragon of cool professionalism. Now the roles were confused.

He quickly collected his thoughts - back through the years they galloped to 1976 ('77 and '78 were quite forgettable). Okay, he decided, I'll try the old massage technique - I remember reading about it. (Of course he did, he'd been reading my diary, the swine! - the author). That should be a winner.

He manoeuvred her onto her stomach with consummate dexterity and, removing her negligée, commenced a massage that would consign her to the borders of ecstasy (no visa, no exit). At this point I must interrupt and remind the reader just who is giving this massage - Steve, the fabled Spinak of the Sudan, was not fabled for his human touch. Steve, who in his three plus decades on terra firma had not once bestowed manual affection on a fellow human. Well, maybe once or twice. What strange forces were at hand? Anyway, why miss a chance to traduce my dear friend?

As his moon-tanned hands danced their way over her dark skin, a smile appeared on her face, which disturbed him. No wonder, it was on her left nostril! After fifteen minutes during which he exhibited the full and startling range of his tactile proficiencies, he stopped. Her soft sighs continued to fill the room for another thirty seconds or so before she realised that he had ceased his treatment. Now she was coming along just fine - her rhythm a soothing tone of mellow.

He kissed her slowly and deliberately. But now he was having second thoughts. Did he really like her? Would she respect him for being so easy? Someone was getting a lot of pleasure and it sure wasn't him. Sorry, this was not the deal. What would he say back home if word ever got out? And more important, how much would it take to keep Ken quiet? The reader, at this stage, will be pleased to note that the author was beyond bribery. "I have an obligation to my reader," I was heard to say. Besides, how far does twenty dollars go these days anyway?

It was now time, he decided, to press the point home. However, before he could move into Phase II of the operation, she quickly jumped out of bed, scampered over to her handbag and produced a small rubber object from within. Snuggling back into bed she handed it to him with the direction "you'll have to wear this." - an accurate commentary, the whole scenario was becoming

inconceivable. Steve recognised it at once. His lurid and licentious past was always facile to the recall in more ways than one. He possessed a pornographic memory.

“And you’d better make it last,” she added with silken insolence. “It’s the only one.”

What she really needs, he thought, is an anal, er, -gesic. My first woman in a month and she expects me to make it last. The only way this thing will last is if it’s impregnated with smelling salts.

The fate wrought by this party-stopper was quite predictable. Despite a number of raids into the opposing flanks, interest could not be sustained.

She looked at him in the sombre light of disappointment. “Well, you’ll just have to go down on me,” he suggested now that intercourse was off the menu – a low blow...indeed. All other courses were still on the table – truly a man for all seasons.

“What?” she replied quizzically.

“Well I’m not bloody Lazarus!” he snapped defensively.

“What do you mean ‘go down’?” she asked.

“Christ! You mean you don’t know?” he stared in disbelief.

“No, explain it to me.” Steve was the only boy in his class at school whose father was too embarrassed to take him to the “Father and Son” night.

Well really!

Now he was genuinely abashed. “Forget it,” he returned, hoping to dismiss the subject.

But now her curiosity had been aroused and she continued to pester until he finally relented and hesitatingly began a shaky yet instructive discourse (a prelude to intercourse). Her foray into this putative recondite practice was not dispatched with a great deal of gusto or success.

Finally, out of an increasing onset of apathy, our now somewhat daunted hero suggested they sleep. His remark was greeted seconds later by a chorus of stertorous snores signifying that she’d, at last, taken the initiative.

VI – A LITTLE RAY OF SUNSHINE

No early information had come to hand with regards Ray’s little encounter. As mentioned earlier, the noise in and around the hotel was incredible. In fact, it reminded me of Dante’s Inferno, about which I knew little; it just seemed like a handy metaphor.

As I was descending the stairs the next morning, I heard Ray engaged in an animated conversation with the hotel manager. Apparently, he had given full rein to his passion, but sadly for Ray this was not the bridle suite.

“I have talked it over with the owners,” said the manager dryly “and we would prefer that you left.”

“When?” Ray asked shocked and full of remorse.

“Yesterday!” glared the manager.

“Look, I’m sorry about the damage,” Ray went on. “I’m sure the bed can be repaired and the chandelier wasn’t completely ruined. As far as the mirrors are concerned, well, on reflection they can be looked into. Maybe I can offer you something by way of restitution. How do I stand?”

“You don’t,” came the caustic reply, “You grovel.” And so the philippic continued.

I can’t verify that these were the actual words that transpired but the reader will get my drift.

Not wishing to be discovered I stole away. I returned it later, however, when I found I had no use for it.

Steve and I waited impatiently in the room, eager to hear Ray recount his tale. From early indications it appeared to have been a smashing success. We heard footsteps approaching. They walked past. A minute later we heard some more. Could this be him? Again, they walked past. Another minute transpired and we heard still more (Nairobi was a great place to hear footsteps). I could stand it no longer. I sat down. Then I rushed to the door and opened it to find Ray standing there with a puzzled look shrouding his face. He’d forgotten the room number.

He came in and sat down giving us the sly grin for which he was notorious. Twenty seconds passed and still nothing. And there we were, Steve and I, breaths bated, waiting for our dose of vicariousness. Suddenly Steve lurched forward in an attempt to throttle our silent companion.

“All right, all right, I’ll talk,” (as if there was ever a doubt - he just loved the attention) spluttered Ray trying to fend off his assailant.

His night had been one of unparalleled triumph. Not only had several of the furnishings and the earth moved for them, he also cured his companion of constipation. All his fantasies had been fulfilled.

With the unabashed naivety that we have come so closely to associate with him, he launched into raptures about her ministrations (no, it wasn’t that time of the month, dummy). Was it true love? One thing was certain - he would never be the same again. Not that he was the same before.

Two hours later, while going on my daily constitutional, I happened past the post office just in time to see Ray disappear into the international telephone section. I quickly followed him making sure he hadn’t seen me. Before long he entered a booth and picked up the receiver. As he did so, I slid over beside the booth.

The following is a rough transcript of the conversation I overheard. As the noise in and around the building was not particularly conducive to eavesdropping, I have filled in the gaps with words I feel reflected the true nature of the call. I trust the reader will, once again, forgive any inaccuracies. I know Ray never will.

Hello Dad? ... It’s Ray ... Ray, you know, your son’s brother ... R as in Randy, A as in Andy, yeah, that’s right ... I’m in Nairobi ... no there’s no need to bail me out... yes they did. I took them four times a day like it said on the bottle ... Dad, there’s something I have to tell you... no, I didn’t realise it was four o’clock in the morning, all I can see is sunshine ... Yes I’ll remember to visit your uncle if I go to London, and I won’t forget to visit the Tower either. Dad! This call is costing me a dollar every thirteen point six seconds (Did I mention Ray was an accountant) ... Listen, I met this girl. Her name’s Rachel ... Now wait a minute. Just because her name’s Rachel, it doesn’t mean she’s Jewish ... Yes, I suppose she could convert but she’s a Masai, and she may not want to ... a Masai ...you know, the Masai are an East African tribe ... Dad? ... Dad, are you still there? Hello, hello, operator, the line seems to have gone dead.

As the plane took off from Nairobi airport bound for Australia, a solitary figure stood at the departure gate. A tear trickled down her cheek.

EPILOGUE

Two days after this episode occurred, I deposited myself in a coffee house and jotted down all I could remember about the evening’s escapades. It was rare for me to compile notes of any description, but that night was such a standout that I figured I could get good mileage from it upon my return to Australia. Subsequent contemplations meant that I got that and so much more.

It was remarkable in many ways. Although by that stage I had travelled extensively on every continent and the boys, too, had been strangers in many strange lands, this represented our first encounters with prostitutes. It was not planned in advance, nor had we ever talked about the possibility of it ever happening. Nairobi didn’t appear to be rife with prostitutes, so how were we all drawn so compellingly together? Both we, and the time, simply must have been ripe.

One week later, Steve and I were relaxing on the tiny former Arab slave island of Lamu, just off Kenya’s north coast while Ray was sequestered further south on the mainland, in Malindi, where he and Rachel, whom he had persuaded to join him over the long weekend, were staying with her sister.

As fascinating as Lamu was, I found the atmosphere more conducive to pulling up a wicker chair and putting pen to paper, while our lips were still abuzz with the thrill and amusement of that evening.

The light-hearted tone of those revelations, now make it incumbent upon me to add this epilogue or, if you will, apology.

Decades on, I now have a greater understanding of the social and economic pain the population suffered and endured, and which in turn has given me greater insight into the events of our memorable Nairobi night.

Two days later, I ran into both Steve’s and my ladies. Steve’s was wandering through the supermarket doing her shopping and gave me a warm greeting. I asked her to join me for a coffee and we walked a short distance to the Hilton patisserie.

It was a convivial tête-à-tête and very frank one. She lived in Nairobi and couldn’t find work. She told me she hadn’t worked as a prostitute before, but since many of her newfound friends did, she too had chosen that path. She had no idea what to expect - it went a long way to explaining her earlier behaviour. She felt that until she found other work, she would keep walking the streets.

I met my friend, Zena, not far from the Ambassadeur and she also greeted me with warmth. I must confess that I was somewhat embarrassed after my poor performance, but she seemed completely natural and was tactful enough not to mention it. I shared a beer with her and enjoyed it. There were no expectations and I discovered more about her in this fifteen minutes than I did in our previous few tawdry hours of empty role-playing together.

Zena was not a native of Kenya but a refugee from Somalia. There she and her family had been living in squalor and, faced with the dilemma of remaining there without hope of relief, or leaving her homeland and going to Kenya in search of a better life, survival enjoined her to take the road south.

Her sister had left before her and found accommodation on the outskirts of Nairobi, and Zena followed soon after. They could not legally work and so turned to prostitution out of necessity. It was clearly not their choice of occupation but it did allow them to eke out an existence and still have some left over to send surreptitiously to their family back home.

Since I didn't spend any time chatting to Rachel, my information about her is somewhat more sketchy. Ray informed us that she and her family, Masai people from the central Kenya, had moved to Mombasa on the coast and then further north to Malindi in search of a better life. Better opportunities did not present themselves for her there so she gravitated to the big smoke, Nairobi, where she found an office job which paid her poorly, but paid nevertheless. She found it was still necessary to supplement her income and had not been at it long when we arrived.

It seemed a strange sacrifice for her to spend a week travelling down to the coast with Ray. Perhaps she saw in him the flicker of a chance to escape.

I mentioned before that Nairobi wasn't rife with prostitutes. I was wrong. The place was swarming with them but they predominantly kept a low profile and knew where to find work. It was basically the parvenus who plied the streets as openly as did our acquaintances. I guess we were all new. All pawns in a bigger game with which we were all unfamiliar.

So, in terms of the transactional gains from these encounters, were there any benefits? Well, yes. The women may have put food on their tables or purchased much needed items for their families; money which would not be wasted. Did we help perpetuate a practice that resides in a sad side of human existence? I think not. One analysis might suggest we assisted in their battle against their enforced impoverishment. And did we gain anything? For me, there was little pleasure, corporeal or otherwise in my encounter. But I left Nairobi

having gained a deeper sense of enlightenment as to the sadness of survival in a world more brutal than the one that I have ever had to experience.

Two weeks after our arrival in Kenya we were gone. Steve and Ray were en route to Australia via The Seychelles and Bombay. I headed to South Africa for a couple of months before spending six months travelling overland northward until I reached Tangiers at the opposite end of the continent.

During this northbound trek I passed through Nairobi in late April, nearly four months after my previous visit. I found a cheap hotel not far from The Gloria, where I stayed for about a week. Although I had no intention of going down the same path as before, I still took delight in walking the streets after my evening meal. I particularly kept a lookout for any of the trio but they were nowhere to be seen. It was as if they belonged to another time, consigned to a precious corner of my memory, possibly in more hopeful circumstances than their beleaguered homelands can now provide.

THREE

THIS MONTH IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC. (May 1980)

THE TOUR DE FARCE

ANOTHER PROLOGUE. THEY SHALL NOT GROW OLD

We needed water. Our supplies were running low - not uncomfortably low but enough to warrant our departure from our intended route through Lodwar to Lokichoggio and on into The Sudan.

Travelling through Northern Kenya to The Sudan and then heading west skirting the border of Uganda was somewhat unpredictable. I had tried the overland route south from Khartoum with a couple of mates nearly six months earlier and met with nothing but frustration. The political situation between north and south was too volatile, leading to roads being cut and stories were rife of Amin's exiled Ugandan troops creating a swathe of terror wherever their drunken bloodlust led them. That time I flew out. This time flying was not an option.

I was now six weeks into an overland trip on a truck with twenty others negotiating the continent from South Africa to Europe. This was a group of strangers who met up in Johannesburg (Joburg) and would spend the next five months camping our way overland heading north through the continent.

We hailed from Australia, New Zealand, America, Canada, The Netherlands, Britain and Switzerland. Many would remain friends over the years. Some were not equipped for the rigours that this exercise would entail and consequently, minor eruptions occurred. But overall, it was a pretty cohesive group that pulled together through whatever circumstances prevailed.

We had to be prepared for lengthy delays and since our water supplies had started to run low, we diverted east to Lake Turkana. We heard that we could get all the water we needed there. It must have taken a couple of days to reach the lake. To my memory the land was featureless, parched by a relentless sun and relieved here and there by the skeletons of shrubs that goats had neglected as they uprooted the plants as part of their contribution to the desertification of this forsaken area.

Small depressions were stained with salt (tears of the earth), as waterholes receded and what little water or moisture was to be found was no doubt undrinkable. We saw one vehicle in those two days - a truck. It sat motionless on the road facing us as we drove around it. The driver smiled and waved. We saw perhaps two or three groups of people wandering with their goats in search of God knows what. They were emaciated, dressed in remnants of rags and looked old - not chronologically, but their eyes were weary. The lights weren't there. They must have known.

All my nights in that dark month provided escape. I wouldn't bother with a tent. I set up my army surplus stretcher under the stars. These nights were special. Most nights my Canadian friend Dave, with whom I shared a tent when we bothered to use one, and I would retrieve our two liqueur glasses we'd bought in Nairobi from our packs and fill them with a local coconut-coffee concoction Afrikoko, we'd purchased in the same place, sit astride our stretchers and reflect. Sometimes I'd play some quiet songs on the guitar. And always I'd lie down before giving myself to sleep and stare at the heavens. I'd count the shooting stars and transcend to the romanticism of the moment, knowing and feeling the futility of African wishes and dreams - these ephemera were merely dying rocks burning before they had the chance to add to the barrenness that engulfed everything here.

Goats weren't the only animals we saw. They were simply the live ones. Carcasses littered the road - actually it was never a road, just a path of dryness. Cattle and asses were mummifying everywhere one looked. It was May 1980! The drought had not yet peaked. For nearly everyone and everything it was the beginning of the end. Already hope was a rare commodity.

We bought enough water at the lake and headed west again to resume our journey to Lokichoggio in order to complete passport formalities before crossing the expanse that constituted the border. Everything seemed the same - maybe a corpse or two had been added but unnoticeably so. Even the truck was still there. This time the driver didn't smile - the bullet hole and the brown stain running from his forehead told his story. And, of course, the flies.

I - 'JUBALATION'

Juba was our last stop of note before striking west towards Central African Republic. We drove around for a short while making enquiries about purchasing fuel for the long and uncertain journey ahead. Juba, was at that time, the largest town in southern Sudan and a most strategic one at that. Of course, now it is the capital of the world's newest nation, South Sudan, another entrant in the increasing list of failed states of the world. It is the centre of the Christian south that has been in almost constant conflict with the Khartoum-centred Arab-Moslem government since the country gained independence in the mid-50s. The military presence is always conspicuous.

II - A LIMEY SQUASH

Having acquired our fuel without ado we sought out a watering hole to quench our thirsts. And what a singular place it was. Set amidst a rambling tree-studded garden, it was a true vestige of the country's colonial past. Much more than water was available. I quickly downed a couple of squashes and took myself on a tour of the place. I approached an odd-looking square-shaped building, and noticing it had no roof or windows, opened the door and to my astonishment discovered it was a squash court, no less.

Now, if someone had said there was a squash court in Juba, I would have naturally thought it to be a place where squashes were grown. Not so. The fact there was a court of any description in southern Sudan might stretch one's credulity given the manner in which justice is dispensed in that area of Africa or most others for that matter. There was no doubt about it; anywhere that the Mother England had laid her colonial racquet was home. At least they were smart enough to leave a roof off; the town was like a sauna anyway.

A strange game squash, a female acquaintance once remarked to me. Why, she asked, would one want to play around in a hot box for an hour working up a sweat? A wry smile was the only answer she received. If one played the game

before or after the sun was overhead then adequate ventilation was achieved in relatively cool conditions. The court was obviously still used - the plaster and the markings on the wall would have long since vanished had the court fallen into desuetude.

It was a shame, I thought, that there was no one there, it'd be nice to have a hit after three-month absence. Well, as if preordained, just as my mind's cursor had moved on from that fancy, the putt-putt of a motor scooter wasn't heard approaching, stirring up a helluva dust screen in the compound! There was no mistaking what sort of person it was - gaunt, bespectacled and lily-white skin - the signs of a true Englishman. And, as if to preclude any doubt whatsoever, he carried two squash rackets in his pannier. Mad dogs and Englishmen, eh! The stereotype lives on.

We smiled in greeting as he alighted from his mechanical steed, did a few meaningless and ineffectual stretches, and entered the court as my mental alarm clock went off. I was ready to pounce. I couldn't resist the opportunity and offered to give him a warm-up while he waited for his opponent. He readily assented.

He took the warm-up most seriously refusing to let the ball bounce twice before dispatching it back to my side of the court with a great deal of grunting and groaning. Somewhat encouraged by my lack of effort in attempting to return the ball, he challenged me to a game. This guy was no squash player - the game was short. He won only a few points. His mood had changed markedly as the game progressed. He looked pointedly at his timepiece and, after remarking that his friend apparently wasn't going to arrive, mumbled a fare-not-so-well and disappeared leaving a wall of dust and several small pools of perspiration on the court. And the squash ball. I'm afraid I may have spoilt his afternoon.

III - EXIT STAGE WEST

There aren't many routes out of Sudan - God knows why. One would imagine the more escape routes the better. Generally, they're north-south paths. The trail east takes one into Ethiopia, while the westward path leads into either Chad or Central African Republic, none of which whet the tourist appetite or those who have a stake in a continued existence for that matter. I have very little recall of the condition of the track into The Central African Republic.

We only discussed the possibility in passing, of encountering rebel Ugandan troops. In fact, in the few days or so it took us to traverse the region, I don't remember seeing any other vehicle at all. And the only people we saw were

the locals when we passed through the few tiny villages that punctuated the way. These people were obviously not used to vehicles - as our truck approached, the roar of the engine or the clouds of dust that heralded our arrival, lured the children to the side of the track and they stood there waving at us, wonderful smiles on their faces, as we passed through their day and their lives. For what is stranger in a strange land than the strangers who come to visit it?

IV - DIPLOMACY TAKES A HOLIDAY

It was late afternoon when we drove into the compound at the border. Although there was jungle within a short space, the compound itself was completely devoid of vegetation. Small stones were arranged to mark off boundaries of houses and offices from the road. Women with brush brooms could be seen from time to time sweeping the dust from one dry patch to another before small gusts of wind undid their work - a woman's work never being done. The compound supported a little community of, what I estimated to be, about fifty.

As we approached the offices, I noticed that the flag had been taken down for the day. These places never missed the chance to fly the national flag. The fact that it had been taken down, probably meant something. I said nothing. A few officials were sitting in the shaded part of the small veranda drinking the local brew and greeted us warmly upon our arrival. Our driver, who had our passports and forms all ready for processing, walked over to the veranda and shook hands with whomever was within easy access.

It was impossible to hear the conversation that ensued but it was easy to see that it was growing more animated and in a distressing manner. The driver, abruptly threw his hands in the air (not easy to when you're not a leper), turned, and marched back to the truck and, revving the engine unnecessarily loudly, shot the vehicle off leaving the whole area shrouded in an early brown twilight. And none of us, the wiser.

What had transpired was this: the officials had told him that the border was closed for the day and refused to listen to his supplications (we'd listened to his supplications from time to time and he was always off key). They did, however, suggest we could pitch our tents in the compound to save driving away to look for a suitable clearing. Given that they'd closed up shop, this was reasonable enough, I thought.

To the Westerner, it is sometimes difficult to relate to the African's perception of time or, indeed, the time framework of any one culture outside

our own. Time doesn't always matter as much to them. No doubt the incidence of hypertension in these countries doesn't match our own. It is nearly always possible to put off 'til tomorrow what could have been done today. Sometimes, due to circumstances within one's control, even tomorrow has to be postponed.

Now, this driver of ours had never been noted for his tact and diplomacy and had often widened the dimension of the word subtlety. He'd made many trips through Africa and Asia, and when he finally hung up his keys word has it that the rumour around the traps was that he'd made one trip too many. Unfortunately, it didn't require a lot of intuition to be well aware that this was it.

Anyway, having listened to their response, he waxed most contumely (he'd have been better advised to wax the floor of the truck) and bluntly refused their offer telling them that we'd be pretty stupid to camp there because by morning all our possessions would be stolen. It was then I realised one of the things that separated this guy from the rest of us - he'd been fitted with a cerebral bypass. Either that or he was one of the world's few living brain donors. Did he really listen to some of the things that came out of his mouth?!

So we drove about twenty minutes down the road, found a clearing and, in unusual silence, pitched our tents and waited for the rostered cooks to prepare our evening meal, one that no matter how well-prepared, would not be dispatched with a great deal of gusto given the prevailing circumstances.

V - THE USUAL CUSTOMS

I awoke a little before dawn to the bugling of the hornbills as they dived from tree to tree. They really are strange birds. Their beaks seem much too heavy for their bodies and they fly by flapping their wings a few times and follow their beaks in an earthbound arc for an equal distance before flapping their wings again and relaunching. Normally listening to the bush or jungle come to life fills me with wonderment. On this morning, however, clouds hovered a few kilometres down the road.

The atmosphere at breakfast was still a little sombre. At mid-morning we arrived back at the border. This time the flag was flying high and everything appeared unchanged except that the veranda was empty and there did seem to be a little more dust on it.

The greeting we received was considerably less convivial than the previous day's salutation. It must have been something that someone said. We sat shaded in the back of the truck while the driver completed the formalities

inside. Crossing this border, alas, was now not going to be a formality - when the driver emerged after an inordinately long stay, he told us that we had to unload the entire contents from the vehicle. It was payback time.

This was the second time we'd run afoul of this kind of officialdom. Three months earlier, while entering Tanzania from Zambia we'd encountered an overzealous askari who, after inspecting the food we were carrying under the seats, took exception to the fact that the labels were South African and decided to confiscate our entire cargo. A day and a night of ridiculous negotiations and the offering of a small gratuity resolved that problem.

It's sad, in Africa, that money so often makes principles negotiable; hell, why stop at Africa! Money does indeed make the world go around. It's not money, as some would posit, that is the root of all evil; it's the love of money, and for once I found myself agreeing with the Bible. Well, by this stage I don't think we had any South African goods with us and the inspection confirmed that. Perhaps if we'd removed the labels we could have eaten "Dehyd Surprise" every night and still not been able to differentiate. Most of our remaining food was dehydrated stodge which we'd garnered somewhere along the way. We supplemented our meals with fresh produce from whatever local market we happened to stumble upon.

Within twenty minutes the truck and trailer had been thoroughly emptied of food and luggage. An official then painstakingly proceeded to search everyone's possessions leaving no stone unturned. Although it was frustrating, I must confess it was to a degree, fascinating. You see, while this was going on, everyone had to stand around and since there was nothing else to do, we got to see the secret possessions of the other travellers.

One of our group, Will, a strange Dutch guy in his late forties, a good ten years older than the second most senior of us, had a suit in his bag - God knows why, but even sadder for him was the fact that wrapped in this suit were two small elephant tusks. He was hauled inside and returned a few minutes later informing us that the illicit merchandise had been confiscated. I don't think anyone was overly concerned.

Will was somewhat of a dolorous character who really hadn't reckoned with what this journey was about. His command of English wasn't very good and one felt that he'd been either quite misinformed about what this trip entailed or simply didn't understand what he was in for. Word had it that he'd been working in South Africa for a few years where he didn't bother to learn English, their other official language.

I learnt later that he actually had three suitcases in which he'd decided to transport all his belongings through the heart of Africa, back to The Netherlands. Lorne, one of our designated trailer packers had placed these suitcases at the bottom of the trailer so as not to be encumbered by them in the daily unloading and reloading. It was most unfortunate when one of our petrol drums sprung a leak and drenched the entire contents of these suitcase. There was a certain sadness about him.

And thorough these guys were. When it came to my turn, they made me empty my pack completely onto a ground sheet. Even my toiletries were closely examined as I sarcastically explained the use of each article (this is toilet paper and we use it... déjà vu "all over again" - and why is it always the toilet paper?) before placing it back in my bag.

This went on for a couple of hours before all the bags had been emptied, repacked, and were ready to be loaded once more. But before this they decided to go over the vehicle with a fine-toothed comb (a rare commodity in these parts). They checked the roof, the inside of any pipes, anything that was hollow, and finally two of them crawled under the truck and, horror! Lorne froze - he'd forgotten his makonde, or the Big Mac as it had become affectionately known. A makonde, as I'd discovered a few years earlier, is a carved figure or mask fashioned usually out of teak. It is indigenous to Mozambique although it is now common in Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya where cottage industries have developed around it. The traditional makonde figure is a surrealist piece often depicting a mother figure with child. Dali, during his early years was said to have been influenced by this work. In later years a more popular trend has developed ostensibly to cater for the burgeoning tourist market. This latter style usually portrays a mother figure with a large number of infants ascending her as the tree of life. The figures are life-like.

I'd bought a couple of small pieces on a previous trip to East Africa for about \$15 each. When I'd returned to Australia, I noticed that an African Craft shop was retailing them at about \$400! Quite a mark-up. The piece that Lorne feasted his eyes on while we were in Dar es Salaam stood fully five feet high and was no lightweight. We'd tried many ways to secure it onto the truck but none proved satisfactory until it was wrapped in cardboard and then rubber and tied to the undercarriage of the vehicle where, to all intents and purposes, it was safe, and being out of sight, passed likewise out of mind. It seemed now, however, that everyone was mindful of it - Lorne, because of his embarrassment at neglecting to mention it, and the officials because they appeared to believe it was ivory.

There was a look of malicious expectancy as they unwrapped it. Lorne was apprehensive because he thought they might impound it. This piece, for which I recall him paying about sixty dollars was worth probably twenty times that amount back home in Canada, not that he had purchased it for commercial reasons. It sat for some years, in a quiet corner of his humble abode in a small town in Alberta. It dominated the room, looking strangely out of place. So obviously he kept his piece and now it takes pride of place in Lorne and Carroll's abode in New Zealand where they settled many years later. The officials masked their disappointment by quickly turning their attention elsewhere.

It was well after noon before we completed our 'formalities'. We'd been standing, without relief, in the hot sun for about three hours and everyone was either bored, irritated, enervated, or any combination of the above. The officials returned to their malaise on the veranda and watched without expression as we drove off.

I felt very little antipathy towards these people despite their having exacted a little backwoods retribution on us for our lack of charity. Christ! What sort of life must they lead! I hope we provided some excitement for them.

VI - THE EMPEROR'S WALTZ

The officials who greeted us on the C.A.R. side of the frontier were most friendly - our cicerone hadn't opened his mouth yet. By a stroke of fortune, the language spoken in C.A.R. is French and our driver didn't speak it. The relief that swept through the back of the truck took with it the gloom that had engulfed us since late the day before.

It was mid-afternoon and since we were only about 100km or less than three hours out of Obo, we decided to set up camp for the night and make the dash for Obo bright and early the next morning. It's unlikely that one would find Obo in an atlas - it's basically a small village of maybe a hundred or so people situated in thick woodland, if not jungle, on the lower slopes of a small hill which is crowned by a mission.

Missions had been the best places to stay during the last decade or so. They were considered safe from the ravages of General Bokassa's maniacs who had been marauding the country with the butchery and abandon matched only by Amin's buffoons in Uganda. Although, the more one reads of post-colonial Africa, any country without its fair share of savagery and butchery was almost impossible to find. And even though Bokassa had fled only months before, his troops hadn't been completely checked.

It would be too early for us to notice any changes since Bokassa's departure. His fourteen-year "reign" had brought the country to its knees economically and spiritually. His opponents and even petty thieves were dealt with so summarily that it was not uncommon to see them beset upon in public places and beaten to death often with the participation of the general himself.

Needless to say, successive French governments had supported him with aid and arms - uranium and game parks were worth the compromise, and let's face it, governments the world over have often put a very cheap price on their souls in the name of political and economic expediency. This is not, by any means, to denigrate the French themselves; so many wonderful people from that country have, over the centuries, laid down their lives in their resistance of tyranny and the support of all that is noble in the human spirit. They, even in later years, managed to distance themselves from the Coalition of the Willing who invaded Iraq leaving everything in a mess. Mess? Well, that's an understatement if ever there was one. A modern-day Pandora's Box was opened, unleashing evils that continue to rack the world. Of course, some sectors of America couldn't but help express their chagrin at the failure of unilateral support to invade that country on spurious and concocted evidence, that French Fries in the White House canteen appeared, on the menu, renamed as Freedom Fries. Only in America. Delusional naivety indeed.

Towards the end of his time in The C.A.R., Bokassa decided to emulate his hero Napoleon and have himself crowned emperor. He designated nearly all of the country's GNP for the entire year, for his coronation with the unstinting support of the French government which, amid a litany of all kinds of support, underwrote a large part of the finance.

He continued along his megalomaniacal path for another year or so until some sordid revelations about his recent past became so intolerable that even the French saw no other option than to support the coup which finally ousted him. Perhaps the straw that broke this camel's back was the leakage of the news that he had been responsible for the murders of over a hundred school children who had boycotted schools over a dispute about the wearing of school uniforms.

He fled to France (no other country was prepared to have him) and after weeks confined to his luxury jet on the tarmac, he was apparently spirited away and was whiling away his time in a luxury villa or castle in the south of that country. In 1986 from The C.A.R. he was tried in absentia and sentenced to death for treason and murder. The following year he was cleared of cannibalism (what, no evidence?). When he did return in late 1986 his death sentence was commuted to life in solitary confinement but just six years later, he was unexplainably and

somewhat suspiciously freed. He continued to live a quiet life in Bangui until his death in 1996. So much for justice.

VII - ROCKY ROADS AND VIOLENT CRUMBLES

The main road to Obo and west across the country is a seldom-used one. Without a four-wheel drive one would hazard to suggest that it is impassable. We were on the road at daybreak and it wasn't long before we realised that this short jaunt was not going to be easy. The road was a track that wove its way around and over hills through the jungle which often encroached onto our path. The best traction was gained when the dirt and mud gave way to stones. Frequently we had to stop because when stones gave way to rocks, the going could be precarious, sometimes necessitating that the passengers walk ahead for safety's sake.

And when we came to a rocky patch on a hill the going was even tougher. Just looking at what confronted us was enough to dampen the spirits of even the most sanguine among us. But push on we did. That is until we came face to face with what seemed a relatively easier hill. We were half way up when suddenly we lost power. After a degree of fussing around it was discovered that the differential had snapped beyond repair.

I'm not, to this day, sure what a differential is when it comes to mechanics, but I think it's got something to do with making the vehicle go, but hey, that's just a guess. This was a complete body blow - without the "dif" it would take a month, if luck fell our way, to reach Bangui, the capital, which would normally be about four- or five-day drive.

Our first task, however, was to get to Obo. It was now late in the afternoon and several attempts to ascend this twenty-degree incline proved entirely futile. The wheels spun without traction on the bare rock faces, and backing down the hill to make a run would almost certainly do in another axle.

We'd already lost an axle just out of Lusaka in Zambia nearly three months ago - we were just driving along when bang, the axle snapped and we careered off the road into the bushes. Fortunately, the land then was pretty flat and injuries were only minor apart from some undiagnosed brain damage that was only now manifesting itself.

It was late on a rainy night when that incident occurred but fortunately, we were just a few kilometres from a mission cum poultry farm where we could

bunk down for a few days. Interestingly, when we signed the guest book, sure enough, there was my name where I'd made the entry three years earlier when I'd passed through Zambia. I even remembered some of the family, lovely people, if you could overlook the religiosity. In the comment section I'd left a quote from a passage from Ecclesiastes just to maintain the spirit (you know - the one about "for everything, there is a season...").

As day broke the next morning, we discovered, to our great joy, that there was another truck similar to ours which had been abandoned and we were able to cannibalise the parts we needed. No matter that we had no mechanical devices to assist us. We merely propped both trucks up with 44-gallon drums, and with a lot of grunting and shoving, a dozen or so of us completed the onerous task.

So once again, in a very different part of the continent, we were left to solve our problem without any mechanical aid. There was no point in waiting for another vehicle - it could be weeks before one appeared.

The next twenty-four hours would pass very slowly. The only way we were going to get the truck up the hill was to reconstruct the road. This would have to wait until morning as it was getting dark and, given a choice, we preferred to set up our tents and prepare the food without artificial light since it tended to attract hordes to insects, which became nothing less than infuriating.

There were no natural clearings so we had to camp wherever we could. Some of us pitched tents on the flatter parts of the track while others took to the foliage with a machete (which is a damned sight less uncomfortable than taking to it with a sleeping bag). We'd done this many times before so it was no big deal - the two-man tents didn't take up a lot of space.

Cooking was never much fun. There were twenty of us travelling together and we used a roster system. We worked in pairs and did two days on actual cooking and two days on washing up. I suppose there might be better arrangements but this one worked for us. It meant that when one's rostered turn to cook came around, that those two days could, to a large extent, be written off. Cooking not only required the preparation of food, but the purchase of it also. This fortuitously provided some of the better moments of the duty - although, as mentioned earlier, we carried a certain amount of dehydrated, we preferred to buy the local food wherever possible and whenever funds permitted. And food was purchased at the cheapest place possible, the local markets.

I have a penchant for walking through foreign markets and rarely pass up the chance. So naturally, buying food for the troops was no chore. Our budget was very limited so it was necessary to bargain, an activity I also enjoyed. It

also gave me the opportunity to have a bit of fun with the locals usually at our own expense, mind you.

That night we didn't have much in the way of fresh food. The waste of time at the border and the breakdown precluded any chance of passing through any villages and hence we were compelled to dig into our reserves of dehyds - just add water and cook. God! What an indictment to the taste buds! Still, at the end of a long day I suppose the taste buds didn't mind being somewhat compromised.

The back of the truck was fitted with a portable stove, which, on rare occasions, was unloaded. On most occasions we cooked on an open fire, collecting wood wherever we could find it. Unfortunately, that night the only wood we found was too green and we didn't feel like dismantling the stove and setting it up again outside which was just as well because, before long, the rain started. What a wonderful experience! - Hunched over a hot stove in forty-degree heat and probably a hundred per cent humidity, clothes and bodies filthy from not having been able to wash properly for a couple of days, and struggling to cook for twenty people most of whom were feeling a little short-tempered and getting in each other's way, in a space that was becoming so confined one had to step outside to change one's mind! Such is the traveller's, not the tourist's lot. Of course, the good thing that came out of this was the rainwater that collected on the plastic/canvas roof. It meant that by morning there would be enough water to have a reasonable wash.

By the time we finished cooking and polished off the unsavoury results, I was completely bugged (in the nicer sense of the word - can one be partially bugged in the other sense?). I crawled off into the undergrowth and into my tent where I collapsed, after peeling off my mud-caked garments, body filthy with dried-up riverbeds where my sweat had run from me, and hair matted. The good thing was that I couldn't have cared less - it was a little past eleven o'clock and sleep descended upon me with deserved alacrity.

The rain stopped, morning came, and as I opened my eyes and peered through the mosquito net, the jungle fairly sparkled. It was that wondrous time between waking and realisation. The world was pristine and it held hope. Then came the sound of people rousing and this was followed by that realisation - the exigencies of the day were about to manifest themselves once more.

Breakfast was an easy meal to prepare - just put the water on, mete out the muesli, and make up the powdered milk. The prevailing mood was once again a little sombre. Everyone was cognisant of the job ahead and was in no hurry to eat too quickly. After an hour or so all was in readiness for the day ahead. The sun had been up for only a short time but already we could tell that the day was going to be another scorcher.

Our equipment for reconstructing the road consisted of two pick axes, a couple of shovels, three or four buckets for transporting dirt, and about fifteen strange-looking containers of elbow grease. Hardly the stuff highways are made from. We needed to prepare a path, which was flat enough to make a steady ascent. This meant chipping away at rocks and where we couldn't do that, building up the gaps with small rocks and stones as well as dirt we dug from the bush. On top of that we placed palm fronds to minimise slippage which could be dangerous if the truck slewed sideways.

One wouldn't say that it was backbreaking labour, but it was tiring in the increasing temperature and we stopped frequently to quench our thirsts as it was easy to become dehydrated within a short time.

When we finished it was well past midday. The truck was reversed as far as possible so a steady speed could be attained and we positioned ourselves at strategic points so that if the vehicle did start losing traction or started to skid sideways, we could, while it was safe, assist as much as strength allowed us. We also had sand mats placed where we thought the track was most suspect.

The truck rolled forward gathering speed slowly. By the time it passed the bottom of the gully it was doing about ten km/per hour. This was as fast as we wanted it. Sand and fronds flew out from beneath its wheels as it lurched hesitatingly forward. As it reached Dave and me the wheels spun a few times and it started to drift over towards the side of the road. Already some of the others had tacked on alongside, running and pushing whenever it began to lose traction. We threw ourselves at its side pushing outward and forward as it forced us towards the undergrowth. A couple of times I lost my footing and desperately clung to the side while I struggled to regain my balance.

The truck continued forward and was gradually corrected as we barged through the small bushes that wandered close to the track. Finally, to a chorus of cheers, the monster came to a stop at the top of the hill. Bruised and bleeding, as some of us now were, we slumped to the ground and lay there retrieving our breath, believing that Obo was now just a short drive away.

None of the ensuing hills presented any major problem en route to Obo. We did, however, stop at the base of most rises and get out to inspect the road in order to ascertain the safest path up. And a few times we also had to give the truck a helping hand, but nowhere was there a need to put a shovel or pickaxe to the dirt. If, as we thought, this was the extent of our travails, we could have been well pleased. Unfortunately, such was not the case, and within half-an-hour of leaving 'heartbreak hill', we encountered a new dilemma - a river.

Actually, the river itself was not the dilemma, but the fact that the bridge was down, was. Rivers in this area may be only ten to twenty metres wide and the bridges, such as they were, comprised of a number of flattened logs that neatly straddled the small abyss.

Being in the heart of the tropics it rarely took long before the wood started to rot. This was only discovered empirically - invariably a collapsed bridge was accompanied by a truck, also in various stages of decomposition, which had plunged into the river. This meant, for us, that we had to rebuild the bridge with whatever material was on hand and this was usually the remains of the bridge itself. Later, after Obo, we bought some planks which proved to be invaluable on our journey to Bangui.

This first encounter was somewhat fazing, for not only were we totally inexperienced in this sort of exercise, we also had to ensure there were enough planks on the bridge to accommodate the trailer. You see, the gauge of the trailer's wheels was much less than that of the truck and unless the bridge was constructed of enough logs, as was rarely the case, the trailer had to be taken across separately. This meant first unloading it to make it lighter and to ensure the safety of our luggage.

Our second task was to reposition one of the logs to accommodate the smaller gauge and this was a bloody nuisance since we'd only just secured the log to get the truck across. Next, since the front wheel of this three-wheeled contraption would more than likely not have anything to rest on, we had to laboriously walk the trailer across balancing it alternatively on the two sand mats that proved so invaluable time and time again.

We passed through many villages on our way to Obo always waving to the people who unhesitatingly waved back flashing toothy smiles. They couldn't have been used to seeing much transport through this part of the country given the state of the roads. And I'd hazard to guess that they'd had very little contact with whites - we were only on this road through default since the road through Zaire, our first choice, was inaccessible. But behind their curiosity, I like to think there was genuine warmth and happiness. They were subsistence farmers a long way removed from the tribulations that their civilised counterparts had wrought on the town and city dwellers of this sad country.

VIII - MISSION IMPROBABLE

It was mid-afternoon when we arrived at another small village on the side of a hill. We crawled up the incline and beyond the mud and dung huts with

thatched roofs, were three or four stone buildings, the most prominent of which being a chapel. The sign, burnt onto a wooden board, greeted us with the words "African Inland Mission - Obo". (The Heart of Lightness?)

A communications base at last! Except for the head of the mission - I don't recall his title, a western witch doctor of sorts - the rest of the clerical staff or family were away. There were no phone lines thereby precluding any hope of contacting London, or anywhere else, immediately, in search of the necessary spare parts to ensure the continuation of our journey.

There was, however, a two-way radio, which enabled us to contact the closest big town which contacted Bangui which in turn spoke to London. Well, after a couple of days the equipment was located in London and we were informed that it would be arriving as soon as possible via Nairobi of all places! I'm sure there was an explanation for this circuitous route but it escapes me. It probably had something to do with saving money.

'As soon as possible', in Africa, was a rather nebulous term. It could mean anything from a few days to a few weeks. Realistically, if the parts were located already and put on the next available flight to Nairobi (incredible isn't it!) and then flown directly to Bangui, and from Bangui by plane, or even overland, to Zemio, the nearest landing place, we could expect our precious consignment within a week. Twenty-three days later, as we left Obo forever, a lot and nothing had happened.

There was no objection to us setting up our tents about fifty metres away from the mission. Enough of a clearing existed for us to encamp in light forest. Trees and plant life abounded but the only pieces of vegetation I could readily put a name to were mango trees and, to our delight, they were everywhere. Rotting mangoes littered the ground and those poor unfortunates who had erected their tents under these trees were forced to seek a new site the following morning due to the falling fruit which tended to keep waking them at irregular intervals. Had one of scientific bent resided here centuries earlier, Newton would have had one less law to consider.

Between tents and trees, clotheslines appeared. It rained a couple of times during our stay but generally the weather stayed dry for periods long enough to enable clothes to dry given the very high humidity.

There were two small buildings another fifty metres further away from us. One was a tiny brick dwelling with a veranda on which we would sit to eat our evening meals and the other was a disused cook-shed which housed a burnt-out woodstove which we soon resurrected as well as a tapless sink. Any water

we needed we pumped into our jerry cans from a well in the main part of the mission.

And I mustn't forget the outhouse - just big enough to squat in and as far removed again from all other habitation. It was generally preferable to use the bush to this enshrined miasma contaminated with flies and maggots.

On the periphery of the mission area, a couple of hundred metres diametrically opposite us, was a hospital. One of the girls travelling with us was a nurse and she decided a visit was in order very early in the piece. I, having worked in and around hospitals for a couple of years, tagged along.

The building was tidy with only a few beds - serious cases, we were informed, were quickly dispatched to Zemio or further afield if the situation warranted it. Both the small waiting room and equally tiny surgery were, to their credit, spotless. Their walls were, of course, festooned with medical charts and diagrams probably designed more than anything else to give the patient the illusion that he or she was in the best of hands. I wonder and hope.

The ward was empty. A couple of patients sat languidly on the veranda. Neither of them wore bandages and I had no way of telling just why they were there. I had expected, based on experiences in other tropical hospitals, to see a variety of skin diseases and even the odd case of leprosy. This then, was a sort of halfway-house hospital by virtue of its propinquity to the mission.

Here was evidence for the faithful, that God was moving in less than mysterious ways.

IX - NO PLACE LIKE HOME

So here we were in Obo, close to the centre of Africa. What our time here for us held, no one knew. In so many ways we were once again strangers in a strange land - an enclave of would-be adventurers faced with ourselves. I saw very soon that if our time here was at all protracted the group dynamics would make an interesting collection of case studies. To survive, I surmised, one would have to pace oneself very carefully and become at times, socially peripheral. I was reminded of *Lord of the Flies*.

One of our group, the driver's girlfriend, revealed herself to be a nasty individual who sought to cause friction at any opportunity. She was one of the few people I've encountered who could have denied her own existence and passed that question on a lie-detector.

Gradually, everyone except the driver, himself, and one of our cohort, saw through her ploy. By the journey's end, two months later, she had only the driver as her ally; the two of them returned to Canada a year later, married, and then divorced sometime after.

The days were hot and humid and not at all conducive to activity. One sought refuge from the climate in any way possible. There was rarely a wind. I often cooled off by sitting on the stone floor of the veranda before the sun's rays set the stone on fire. Just sitting reading. I didn't announce that I had found relief there but a few days into our stay others discovered the spot and invaded my space. I felt violated.

One's personal space is like a bubble - when I felt gregarious, I was, of course, happy to be physically close to most of the group, but at times like those which I sought on the veranda, I needed to be very much alone - out of sight and out of earshot of everyone. I was often forced to vacate my sanctuary in search of another I found in the bushes. I'd simply disappear at various times and spend a satisfactory interlude alone.

Of course, one could not spend all the time reading. For the two hours or so each day when I had a book in front of me, I probably only read for about half of it. My mind was wont to wander at the merest association the book gave to me to something else. Mind you, the stuff I was reading was not what most would call riveting.

I was just finishing *Nicholas Nickleby* having consumed *Pickwick Papers* not long before. I must confess that ever since I left school, I've really enjoyed some of the novelists and playwrights I held in such dudgeon back in those halcyon days. In fact, on my earlier travels I took great delight in carrying a tome of Dickens along with me. The only other book I had with me at this stage was Eric Berne's *What Do You Say After You've Said Hello*, the sequel to *The Games People Play*. This was hardly the book one should read on a trip such as this. However, not having worked in my chosen profession as a psychologist since completing my degree quite a few years earlier, I always liked to keep the cogs turning.

But here there was not a healthy balance of time. Too much introspection at a time like this could be counterproductive. I restricted myself to about ten pages and a plethora of thoughts per day. Sometimes these periods of being down could be overwhelming. I'd been given to depression as a teenager and survived an episode of hospitalisation which I had only started to come to terms with years later.

This is where I ask indulgence from the reader as I briefly recount those tumultuous times for me. It was in my final year of high school when my bouts

of depression became debilitating. My parents, in their wisdom and sense of impotence in the face of this phenomenon, took me to the local doctor who then, without too much consultation, referred me to his mate, Dr. Harry Bailey, the soon-to-be infamous Macquarie St. psychiatrist.

Bailey, and I learned this over a decade later, was a bit of a firebrand and thought little of using his patients as guinea pigs to test his theory of deep-sleep therapy which he claimed would cure depressive illnesses as well as addictions. Patients were maintained in a comatose state for periods of up to weeks and administered massive doses of barbiturates. They were fed through tubes and were sometimes administered convulsive electrical shock treatment also whilst comatose.

This all took place in his private hospital, Chelmsford, in western Sydney. I remember very little about my stay there other than waking up one day and feeling that something was not quite right. I feigned sleep when one of the staff looked in on me and, as they left, somehow managed to find my way into an office where I quickly and quietly phoned my parents, begging them to come and get me out.

That they did. I can't recall talking to my parents at all about these times until over two decades later when I was seeking help for recurrent depressive bouts. As part of my psychological profile I reported my time in Chelmsford whereupon alarm bells started ringing for my psychologist. She asked me whether I'd received deep-sleep or ECT treatment but I had no idea.

I asked my parents and they replied that I hadn't which I duly reported to my psychologist. She told me that, just in case, I should contact a lawyer who specialised in cases such as these, which had now received considerable notoriety to the extent that a Royal Commission had been established. What had occurred was this: over a dozen people had died and many had reported brain damage or paralysis as a result of exposure to the treatment.

It emerged, in my case, that I'd been under deep-sleep and had had four lots of ECT, information about which my parents had remained blissfully ignorant. I was then directed for psychometric testing to establish whether any impairment had resulted. After extensive testing, it was established that impairment was evident and I joined the queue of ex-patients who were awarded compensation. I was, indeed, one of the lucky ones; because I scored highly on most of the scales, I managed, subconsciously to compensate for the measured impairments. Neuroplasticity works in mysterious ways. I'm aware, now, that there are cognitive processes with which I experience difficulty but, as mentioned in the intro to my writing, I managed to get a double degree and

even score high enough to join Mensa in later years. Bailey committed suicide in the early 80s, five years after my time in Obo.

X - INTERLUDE

Emotions were at times running high. The group wasn't a bad one but there were very few "closenesses" amongst the individual members. I know I often felt great loneliness. I needed a woman just to hold and to touch. I found myself thinking of those few women thousands or miles removed with whom I shared some intimacies over the last couple of years. These relationships had died natural deaths but now I'd go through stages of longing for their company once more, knowing in my head that it would be fruitless but feeling in my heart that all could be right. The heart can indeed be a lonely hunter.

In some respects, I was one of the few lucky ones. Dave had recently separated from his wife, and had also been experiencing bouts of depression - he desperately wanted to return home and reconcile himself to her, but secretly knew that it, too, would be to no avail. I think we had a lot to do with saving each other's sanity during those poignant and listless days and nights.

And I realised that these twenty people with whom I was travelling were still complete strangers to me. I thought I had worked some of them out, but now things were different. And furthermore, who was I to them if not twenty different perceptions based on their limited encounters with me? Was I humorous to some, silly to others, abstruse at times or shallow at the same time?

How objective could these perceptions be? Were they less subjective than my own subjectivity was about myself? I was then, twenty or so different images, all subjective, all only a little accurate at best. To others I was not myself but a performer in their lives cast in a part that I was unaware of playing. What was real? Even now as I sit here and pen this, they play their retrospective unwitting roles. They are the fading shadows in the faulty cave of my memory.

This inward spiral was in danger of consuming me. I realised that I needed diversions. I made a few more forays into the group, sometimes playing frisbee, other times just engaging in meaningless bromides which typified a large proportion of the exchanges on this ship of fools, but which nevertheless, had their place.

Everything here needed balance to survive.

As Macbeth ruminates: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.”

XI - A DAY IN THE LIFE

Daily life didn’t start too early - there was no point. Sure, it was agreed upon that meals would be served at certain times to maintain a modicum of order, but apart from a few communal chores and a few personal ones, the days dragged on with ennui becoming the prevailing mood.

At least cooking gave one something to do. We’d made the cookhouse usable and kept it as clean as was possible under the circumstances. One of the locals shot a wild pig and presented us with a side. I can’t for the life of me recall what the meal was like. What I can recall was that from that point on no amount of scrubbing and scouring could clean the place up enough to rid us of the flies which subsequently took up residence in the unfortunate construction.

And what I’ve tried to repress but to a strange lack of embarrassment can’t, was the competition that ensued. Killing seven flies in one blow, as the nursery rhyme boasts would be no boast at all in Obo in the early summer of 1980. The trick to slaughtering these winged miscreants, as I soon discovered, was to place one’s hands about two feet apart (no pun intended) resting on the table-top encompassing the hapless swarms, and, with a god-almighty clap, consign the blighters into oblivion, not to mention one’s palms.

The dead were carefully tallied and, as each record was eclipsed, word would spread around camp so that homage might be paid to the great white hunter. I wore that mantle once with reluctant pride for having dispatched eighteen of the little mites to their maker. But there was no denying Mark. Two days after my Herculean effort, he surpassed all his wildest dreams (perhaps he had other dreams but if he did, he never divulged).

I was summoned by one of the troops to the cookhouse to bear witness. I counted thirty-one crumpled, pathetic corpses on the bench. And there was no doubting who had reeked this bloody havoc - Mark’s palms revealed the unmistakable perpetrator of the carnage that had just taken place. An Olympian deed if ever there was one. He became the Bob Beaman of Obo and henceforth no one even articulated a desire to make an assault on this benchmark. He was indeed our *Lord of the Flies*. If for nothing else I will remember him for that alone.

Actually, Mark was certainly an interesting character. I think he worked in engineering in Australia and was about to embark on a long sabbatical in London. When he finally returned to Sydney, we caught up a few times before our lack of commonality led us along different paths. Mark also had the distinction of not having once erected a tent during the entire time he was in Africa. He simply positioned his camp bed under the stars or, if the weather turned nasty which it did on occasion, drag his belongings under the truck and ride out the storm. Certainly, reports did filter in from time to time of multiple fatalities but in respect to Mark, no mention of competition was ever repeated.

Cooking was never quite the same as it was when we were on the road. There weren’t the daily stops at the market place where everyone wandered around absorbing the local flavour. There was a market, however, but this was an hour’s walk from our camp. This market had very few items we could use. One of the few things I remember buying was some cress-like herbs which were pretty tasteless but which nonetheless supplemented our questionable diet.

There wasn’t a great deal there to interest us but on the periphery of this area were two small wooden sheds which sold, among other smallgoods, canned foods at extortionate prices. Money, for most of us was a little scarce, we were basically backpackers on a truck, so it took a lot for me to purchase a can of Sprite for two dollars (in Bangui it cost about forty cents), and a can of condensed milk for a similar price. At least I didn’t mind drinking the milk hot in my coffee but warm Sprite wasn’t quite the same.

Once, four of us equipped with two long tree branches, bought twenty kilos of flour which we suspended on the branches and struggled with it back to camp. Of course, once we had attained the camp, we weren’t too surprised to discover the flour was infested with weevils. So out came a mosquito net and we painstakingly sifted through the entire load.

One of the things in which we all attained a reasonable level of proficiency was cooking bread. We’d constructed, from a forty-four-gallon drum, an oven in such a way that the dough, once prepared, could be cooked from both above and below, thus resulting in a more than acceptable batch. As successful as we were at this endeavour, we never seemed to replicate any previous efforts.

Our Obo bread was particularly unusual. This was due to the mangoes. As mentioned earlier, mangoes were everywhere. Within a couple of days of arriving in Obo all but two of us had succumbed to minor stomach cramps and diarrhoea. I, myself, had eaten almost a dozen on day one and was extremely fortunate to escape the penalties of my gluttony.

Well, a few days after the initial craze had subsided, it flared up again. Whoever was on cooking duty for that day felt an unspoken imperative to somehow incorporate mangoes into our repasts. Mango jam was quite welcome but when it was served with mango-bread, mashed mango-potatoes inter alia (ad nauseum), it was just too much. Insurrection was only barely averted.

XII - WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

So basically, the days were our own. Diversions were few and far between. A few times I visited the market, which, apart from twice a week when it was in full operation, seemed rather moribund. Then, of course, there was the daily washing ritual. Who would want to miss this! We learnt shortly after our arrival that we were free to use the water at the mission but sparingly since for some obscure reason it was in short supply. Well Greeks and gift horses prevailed so we enquired as to the whereabouts of another source whereat we could administer our ablutions.

This other source turned out to be a tiny, tiny dam across a rivulet that the locals also used. This spot was a half an hour's walk from our camp along a path through light jungle. A few of us usually went together whenever the three or four washing bowls were available.

Generally, we'd take some washing powder so we could clean any dirty clothes and more than often it was a good idea since we'd frequently go through a couple of sets per day and, given the humidity, they could take at least a sunny day to dry. Having travelled with the same people for three or so months, modesty was generally dispensed with but whenever the locals approached, or moreover, we approached them at the water hole, they quickly covered up for they seemed rather abashed. The missions had obviously been doing their jobs – the human body in the eyes of the scriptures, was indeed something to be ashamed of.

Then lo and behold, Boris (not his real name but an unflattering sobriquet he wore quite well), collared three of us one morning with the news that he'd discovered another water hole. Boris was a teacher from London who had undergone a charisma bypass and rarely showed emotion. Well, you can imagine the excitement this generated. We were instantly sworn to secrecy lest everyone start frequenting the place sullyng its pristinity. He'd come upon it the previous afternoon whilst returning from the market and had agonised with his secret overnight before making his startling revelation the next morning.

Naturally we were agog with nonchalance, but nevertheless it was something new and different so we henceforth made plans to visit the spot that very afternoon. So, around threeish by the sun, four of us set out in the opposite direction from the regular waterhole along another well-worn track.

None of us at the time really appreciated the sacrifices Boris was making. First, he had divulged not only the existence of the place and was willing to guide us there, but second, and probably more important, was the fact that in taking us he was subjecting himself to bathing which meant twice in two days and since he was notorious in camp for not being overly fond of this practice, we would do well to suppress any intelligence of today's venture, which if divulged, would shake the camp to its very foundations.

Onward we trudged, plastic bowls in hands. Through three villages we wandered acknowledging the locals with the "Jambo" we had gleaned from East Africa. It strikes me now that they didn't speak Swahili at all but were merely responding in kind to our cheerful salutations. Forty-five minutes after setting out on this circuitous perambulation, we reached our destination, a site not too dissimilar to our other one.

We congratulated Boris on his discovery and proceeded ministering to our bodies and clothes. En route to the camp we debated telling the rest of the group and decided for the interim to hold off, which as it transpired, was a wise decision.

The very next day, the three of us, sans Boris, who had already made the penultimate sacrifice, found ourselves once more at the spot. Within minutes of our arrival two more members of the group arrived but from the other direction. It seems that we'd not found a new waterhole but rather a longer route to the original one! No one had recognised the place from a different aspect! We collapsed into paroxysms of laughter until tears streamed down our faces – God knows we needed a good chuckle. We explained our merriment to the two others who couldn't quite relate to it and resolved not to enlighten Boris just yet.

Two days later when Boris decided it was time, we let him set off by himself and once he was out of sight quickly gathered our washing and headed off in the other direction. When Boris reached the waterhole, he was completely nonplussed upon discovering us well into the throes of our own ablutions. He must have wandered off the track a little, we extemporised, and he seemed to accept this explanation, albeit reluctantly. This happened once again before he realised something was rotten in the state of Obo. For some reason the discovery of the truth seemed to put his nose out of joint – a perverse irony that didn't escape the rest of the troops.

Otherwise daily washing continued as usual, apart from an incident, which resulted in a severe diplomatic strain between the locals and us. One of our gormless cohorts, whom to this day remains nameless, decided to wash her hair and for some reason due either to forgetfulness or plain inconsideration for others, left the waterhole full of soap suds thereby 'contaminating' the drinking supply.

Understandably enough the locals were furious and it was only after fervent pleas and assurances that there would be no repetition of the transgression that we were able to resume our daily pilgrimages.

I can't speak highly enough of the locals' hospitality and tolerance to our ignorance which was displayed on more than one occasion.

XIII - CAFE DE NUIT

I suppose nights were the best of these awkward times. Darkness, as is its wont, cast its blanket of isolation over the camp and small pockets of seclusion soon burgeoned. These always appeared within a short time of the last 'communal' activity of the day - the evening meal. This meal itself was an interesting social phenomenon. We all looked forward to any meal, for in these mundane activities seemed to punctuate the day thereby erasing the previous passage of tedium.

Evening meals were taken on the veranda of cottage where we set up two long trestle tables upon which were placed the two or three cooking pots and all other eating implements. Generally, by the time the evening meal came around we were all famished and this presented a problem. Pretty early on in this trip it was realised that, with males outnumbering females by a considerable ratio, by the time the last persons in the queue served themselves the rations were sorely depleted. Thus, was instituted a system whereby all the plates were laid out and the cooks apportioned the food before anyone ate. I suspect, remembering the size of the proportions, that nouvelle cuisine in Africa started here.

Often, given the size of these servings, there were leftovers. Who was to have these bestowed upon them? This usually went to the fastest eaters - we really weren't that far removed from the animals that we'd been observing over the past few months.

This system or lack thereof quickly got out of hand, so another ingenious one was implemented. Numbers were etched onto our plastic cups and plates and when one's number was up, he or she had the option of accepting seconds, an option rarely not exercised.

The numbering of plates and cups inadvertently was very useful within a short time of leaving The C.A.R. for when we were in a hurry to reach a destination, our lunch breaks were somewhat attenuated and washing up was dispensed with at these meals. We licked our plates clean and stacked them in their usual places obviating, to some degree, the chances of flies and other nasties plaguing us. Also, when crossing the Sahara and water was at a premium, this cleansing method was again reintroduced.

Speaking of insects, there was no way of avoiding the nightly invasion of winged ants. As soon as the sun set and we erected our lighting, the attack would begin. There were hordes of them! And within a short time of their arrival they would shed their wings and carpet the stone floor which was, within a short time, turned into a sort of goeey mulch which did little to stimulate one's appetite.

Fortunately, our appetites weren't in need of stimulation. Thank God for the geckos! These adorable little lizards, which seem endemic to Africa, were more than a welcome sight here. Although their effect on the ant population was minimal, they did a wonderful job on mosquitoes. I used to sit on the wall and count just how many geckos were visible to me at any one time - twenty was not a rarity so one can well imagine the number of insects there had to be to sustain our little friends.

Once dinner was done with, we escaped into the night and up to seven or eight little enclaves would establish themselves. They provided refuge and salvation. There in that corner of time one had a chance to regenerate. There were few sounds apart from the intermittent and circumspect stirring of a few of the nocturnal inhabitants of the jungle, which bothered us not but instead reinforced our feelings of isolation. "Quiet nights and quiet stars, quiet chords from my guitar, drifting on the silence that surrounds me" - Jobim had captured it all. And so we sat, conversation minimal, but communication with the surroundings fairly flowing in that silence.

There was precious little alcohol available but Dave and I had our Afrikoko from Nairobi. Our liqueur glasses which we bought for a few dollars added an air of decadence to the nightly scenarios. I like to think we were just a little that way in the face of the reality that daylight summoned.

I suppose we turned in generally not long after nine, securing our mosquito nets to trees since very few of us had elected to sleep in tents. Lying under African skies never failed to move me - I've been back twice since then and I feel no different now. I do, however, remember waking up one night to a hissing sound and finding a lizard about half a metre-long clinging to the inside of the net within an arm's reach of me.

I don't know what it was and still don't, but I quickly gathered my wits which I always leave beside my sleeping bag, realising any sudden movement was probably not advisable. Slowly I rolled off my stretcher and out from the confines of the net. I then dismantled the net with the lizard trapped inside and carried it fifty metres or so into the jungle where it scampered away taking with it the unexpressed panic that may easily have taken hold of me.

XIV - PLACE MARKS

There were two highlights during our stay in Obo. One occurred during the third week of our internment when a vehicle appeared, the first we'd seen since our arrival. And it was no ordinary vehicle - it was another group of travellers heading south. Thus followed a night of gaiety and social activity the likes of which had probably not been witnessed in Obo in over a century of godliness. There were no women on that truck who attracted me but there was plenty of booze by way of consolation. I laughed as I hadn't for a long time prior to the water-hole incident. It was a wonderful catharsis.

The truck stayed with us for another day during which time we eagerly devoured all their old *Time* magazines. Now we could boast about being in the know on world affairs even if we were still a month out of date. I also managed to swap *Nicholas Nickleby* for another Dickens' tome, *Bleak House*.

The following day the truck departed and we were alone again. Our diversion had left us, but it had left us a little revived with hope. Relations actually improved for a day or two. We even cleaned out the truck!

The other incident, which left a lasting impression on me, was some news, which filtered through to us from the mission via their two-way radio. An attempt to free the American hostages in Iran had foundered. Some US soldiers had lost their lives. And that was it. But I'll always remember where I received the news, the same as I'll always remember where I was when Kennedy was assassinated, when Armstrong walked on the moon and where I was when I first experienced sex - watching a blue movie in a friend's garage, but that's a whole other story.

Life, once more, resumed its predictable pace. Almost anecdotally Will and Ned were bitten by some bug which left no ill effects other than a grotesque swelling of the lips, and in Will's case, also his nose. Maybe they just had an allergy to something, we'll never know. Since they were both blond, they took on the appearance of albino blacks. Ned's symptoms cleared up within a few days but Will's lasted well into Nigeria, a few weeks later. His nose became quite bulbous so that he looked more like a caricature of his former self. The poor

bugger actually believed that he was going to remain like that for the rest of his days and kept uttering something about an ex-army officer he had served under who had suffered a similar fate.

Will, whose command of English as already mentioned, was poor at the best of times, was reduced to wandering aimlessly around the camp muttering something like "Gott fer dammer!" every four or five paces. Of course, Dutch isn't the most mellifluous language even when spoken by Mata Hari during a seduction scene, but Will made it sound more "phlegmish" than Flemish. It seemed as if Providence had translated his mental half-wittedness into a physical incarnation. Anyway, his affliction did earn him a brief respite from sharing the mantle of co-village idiot with Boris, a lull, had Boris had the slightest inkling, he would have welcomed with open arms.

A short note on 'Albinism'. It was a term first coined by the Portuguese explorer Balthazar Tellez who, during his travels to North Africa in the Seventeenth Century, saw many people from this area with light skin and virtually white hair. In Europe one in 20,000 is albino and is not readily discerned as such, whereas in parts of Africa the figure is ten times as high. Albinos also suffer skin cancer at a rate of one thousand times greater than their pigmented brethren and no albino above the age of twenty is free of the disease. In this area only one in ten lives beyond thirty.

XV - GONE TOMORROW

I suppose if one needs something shipped into the Africa, whether its provenance or destination be the Christian, the Moslem or even the Animist Africa, Obo is a pretty recognisable name: from left to right, right to left and even upside down, OBO is still Obo. And so, via its circuitous route our spare part arrived bringing with it an abundance of relief - it was quickly installed. That night, for the first time in three weeks, I fell asleep with an air of anticipation.

The next morning, without fuss, we packed as we had never packed before, and with the optimism of fools, drove out of Obo with barely a backward glance. Gone forever was Obo where the days melted into one another as a blur - it had become a sameness giving me an insight into eternity. And for all my longing to leave and be rid of the place, even now, decades later, it remains with me. It causes me no pain or despair but I remember that there was pain and there were bouts of despair.

Intellectually I am still keenly aware of it but emotionally there's little residue. It's like remembering a broken limb - how does one remember pain?

It forever recedes into a cerebral realm. So I now think of Obo with a perverse nostalgia - another place in another time in which I was more carefree than I am today. But juxtaposed, today's happiness would by far outweigh any such happiness of Obo. This I know, but the strange and inexplicable magnet that is Africa and yesterday still draws me back.

XVI - PAUSE

I sometimes think of people as drops of rain on a windowpane. There is often an inevitability that a set of fortuities will lead them together before they join the flood of indistinguishability.

Did I look back as we drove out of Obo forever? Did anyone see Obo in a positive light? I suspect both answers are negative. But now I often look back, and I sometimes reflect on the experience and learn from it. So there did exist some riches in this impoverished wilderness.

XVII - ALL MOVES IN CYCLES

We hadn't travelled but a kilometre or so before three uniformed men on bicycles hailed us down. They waved us down. God! It's happening again, I thought. The African experience had left its indelible imprint of expectant negativity upon me. And this negativity was nothing short of realism. The conversation with our driver seemed surprisingly amicable. In fact, all they wanted was a lift to the next village. There obviously was no question of not offering them one and of them not accepting. Never mind that we didn't have the space. The back of the truck where we all sat was crowded with wood for burning as well as some long planks in case we encountered more bridges in disrepair.

Our already heavy-laden trailer was now even more so since the acquisition of two 44-gallon drums of diesel to get us into Nigeria. So aboard they climbed after passing their bikes up to us. Now 'cramped' would have been a luxury. Suddenly a bolt of afflatus struck me. Why don't I use this opportunity to get some exercise? I was sure they wouldn't mind if I borrowed a bike. At the rate at which we were travelling there was no doubt that over these tracks I could easily outdistance the truck. Soon three of us, Mark, Sean and I were putting a space between our confreres and us as our path vermiculated its way through the jungles of this God-forsaken country.

I guess it was about an hour before we reached the next village and exchanged the bikes for seats and it wasn't too soon. I'd barely made the distance in spite of the inspiration of both the space and the alternative. My condition had run out and there was no doubt I was going to be pretty sore the next day.

The truck resumed its journey and within fifteen minutes we had stopped. The ignition was switched off, surely the harbinger of more bad tidings. Off we got and quickly understood the reason - a river and the remains of a bridge. The rusting carcasses of two trucks lay half-submerged in the water along with the rotting remains of the beams that must have deceived and lured these machines to their fate. The foresight of purchasing the planks we bought was now going to be vindicated. The planks now had to be secured to the remaining "good" timber in such a way as to take the strain.

The whole exercise took about an hour. Then of course, we had to dismantle the bloody thing! Apparently, there was a chance we'd need them again. Two more of these encounters within the next ten kilometres did little to enthuse us of our chances of reaching Bangui within the next couple of days. At least we were honing our skills as master bridge builders.

We finally reached a clearing and decided that the inner self needed satisfying. Lunch was hastily prepared. I prepared a sandwich and retreated to a log where I could sit in solitude and observe the others. It seemed that just about everyone needed some space and within minutes we were all spread over an area of about an acre but within sight of each other.

Then the flies arrived. Smaller than the houseflies that we know, they descended upon us seeking the warmth of our bodies in the already stifling heat. They buried themselves in our hair, crawling around, seemingly unable to extricate themselves. I felt as if I was becoming demented as I scratched and brushed the little bastards away with increasing frenzy. I couldn't help but recall having read of Speke's experience over a century earlier when he woke up engulfed by tiny beetles. One of them had crawled into his ear and despite all attempts to remove it, the creature had buried even deeper eventually destroying his eardrum. We departed in haste, mercifully ridding ourselves of the pestilence.

We were hot and dirty as we encamped that evening but we took solace in the fact that at least we were mobile again, and without a great deal of exchange, slept a well-earned slumber.

The next day, up we were again at the crack of dawn, early if not bright, ready for yet another day of excitement as we jostled with doom and gloom in the atrium of the heart of darkness. I was probably the first awake and decided

to rouse Dave gently since he was sleeping so peacefully, not that the look on his face suggested peace (braver people than me, I suspect, have looked upon his visage and run screaming into the undergrowth). But I knew the inner Dave.

We had developed a failsafe method of arousing each other from our slumber - the OSSAM. The astute reader will immediately recognise those five letters, not because they come from our alphabet but because they have come to denote the "Old Smelly Sock Arousal Method". You see, washing one's clothes is not one of the creature comforts one can look forward to in many parts of Africa, so it is understandable that, apart from one's knickers, or holey of holies as they tended to become, one's socks were notably the most malodorous item one possessed. Now one's own socks, not to mention one's own farts (there I've said it!) never seem to be as offensive as anyone else's. In fact, I can still remember the first time I ever poked my nose in the tent after Dave had turned in for the night. I honestly thought there was an animal in there in an advanced state of decomposition. So here was one of the advantages of being an early riser. This can be a delicate operation depending on "A", how heavy a sleeper we have and/or "B", how offensive is the sock.

I, personally, have trouble sleeping even after Dave washed his socks so I was an easy mark. The waker slowly brings the sock up closer and closer to the wakee's nose and once it's close enough, and there's no mistaking that point, the rest is pure delight. The nose twitches almost imperceptibly at first - it's telling the brain that more than something's rotten in the state of Denmark and it's not cheese. Then the twitch radiates until the whole of the face becomes animated as if beset by tetany. This is followed in turn quickly by the brain switching into gear, the eyes opening, realisation dawning, and the terms of endearment that issue forth as the wakee's throat is cleared and informing me that I'd better keep checking over my shoulder for the rest of the day.

Ah! The camaraderie - it really does something for the soul. Not that Dave had forsworn practical jokes by any stretch of the imagination! Often something would be amiss and one only had to look around at the faces of those close by to see him sitting there nonchalantly, but with 'gilt' written all over his face - he was a great one for mischief, but couldn't spell to save his life. Even when I turned up in Canada on my circuitous journey back to Australia, we both revelled in the number of practical jokes we played on each other.

In a short aside, I might add that Dave, known to his friends as Dave, was indirectly responsible for my nearly ending up in jail. He was a keen amateur

photographer who, when I stayed with him in Calgary, put on a slide show of our trip which inspired me to buy a good camera and extend my interest into the world of photography. Hitherto, I'd carried with me a small pocket camera which could evoke memories of my travels without my wanting to share them with anyone. Many years later when I started teaching, armed as I was with a collection of Dave's amazing slides of our trip, I found the interest among students and friends was quite surprising.

On my very next trip to Africa, I had a two-day stopover in Singapore and bought myself a nice camera with a range of lenses. These served me extremely well over the years to the extent that I even had some of my photos published in an international world atlas, so I can't have been too bad.

When I was in Mali, just outside of Timbuktu in the large centre of Mopti, I was walking the streets and markets with Debbie and armed with my camera. I loved observing the faces of people as they went about their daily lives. Often, we would ask if they wouldn't mind being captured on celluloid and more often than not, they acceded to our requests. Sometimes it was impossible to ask so one would just hold the camera and pan it across the general scene and surreptitiously depress the button at just the right moment leaving the subject, or subjects, none the wiser.

That's exactly what I needed to do in the Mopti market place. I noticed a wizened old woman sitting on the side of the road, dressed in rags. She cut such an interesting, solitary figure as she sat there seemingly oblivious to her surroundings. Using the aforementioned "wave" of the camera, I panned the device across the panorama and captured, what I thought, would be a beautiful shot of her.

We must have strolled another twenty metres or so when a large Peugeot sedan screeched to a halt, blocking our path. Strange. What was one to think? The back door opened and a well-dressed man in a long-flowing blue caftan got out and strode straight to me. He began speaking rapidly in French. Now, my French being barely rudimentary, so I failed to understand what he was so excited about. I did glean that he wanted to see my permit to take photographs in Mali. In some of the West African countries, it was necessary to purchase such a permit as, I suspect, is a revenue-raising exercise. I showed him my permit, hoping that would assuage him but that wasn't to be. He tried ushering me into the car and, of course, I resisted. He then began pushing me and, of course, I pushed back. It wasn't until he desisted and, reaching into his wallet, produced a document which had the word "police" leaping out at me that I began to rethink the situation.

It was at this stage that I thought it might be prudent to get into the vehicle. I told Debbie to go back to where we were camping and get Patricia, who had lived in Malawi in southern Africa, heading an aid organisation for a couple of years and spoke fluent French.

It was at this stage, also, that I was in danger of doing damage to my underwear. The car sped off with the gendarme and me in the back seat to which, I imagined, was the police station. We arrived and I was escorted by a couple uniformed officers into a sort of waiting room. My anxiety levels were going through the roof. I wasn't really sure about what I'd done wrong, but it must have been serious. Australia doesn't have diplomatic representation in any of the West African countries so I really could be up Shit Creek or River Niger sans paddle.

After what seemed an eternity, I was ushered into an office wherein sat, behind a massive desk, was the Chief of Police, none other than you know who. Fortunately, at just that moment, Debbie arrived with Patricia who commenced talking to the chief. I was completely dumbfounded offering "Je regrette, je regrette." They were the only words that came to mind that I figured might be appropriate. I remembered The Piaf song "Je ne regrette rien", and figured if I left out ne and rien, meaning "nothing", then my utterances might have a placating effect on him. His withering look was a mixture of disdain and pity. At this stage discretion really was going to be the best part of valour.

Patricia quickly overrode my silly linguistic forays and ascertained that, at the bottom of the photo permit, and in fine print, were words to the effect that it is prohibited to take photographs that might bring the country into disrepute.

She went on to explain that my French was very limited, now there's a revelation, and I didn't understand the fine print. She also added that in Australia, all policemen wore uniforms and identification and that I had been completely confused by the turn of events. She was a genius! Well, that did the trick and off we cowered, one of us with his tail between his legs.

So, what could have resulted in an incarceration or loss of a camera, was simply resolved by the removal the film.

How lucky can one guy get?

Meanwhile back in The Central African Republic there were other chores as well as cooking that one must do on roster when travelling in such a fashion

as we were. Collecting firewood, tending the fire, loading the trailer, and any other small job, which needed attention, were always on the daily regimen. On the four or five days a week that I wasn't engaged in an early morning chore, I packed my sleeping bag and tent away before breakfast so that when that meal was served, I devoured it quickly and set off along the track or road along which we were bound. That way I usually got about an hour's start on the truck. I also found the solitude of that meagre hour well and truly replenished the cup.

Any village I encountered was only just stirring - seeing me must have been quite a shock to the inhabitants. Nevertheless, their ingenuous smiles and welcomes never failed to leave me with hope that maybe the chances for humanity weren't so bad after all. I rarely saw much wildlife on these jaunts although I took special pains to proceed quietly. I espied the odd dik-dik and a duiker or two whilst imagining larger quadrupeds ready to leap out of the bushes when they rustled.

One encounter that remains with me vividly to this day was with a snake which I recognised to be an adder of some description. It was lying uncoiled on the track which was the only clearing, obviously waiting for the sun's rays to treat its blood so it could go about its activities for the day. I only noticed it as it moved to avoid my foot, as I was about to descend upon it. If it hadn't seen me and moved, I doubt whether I would have been of much assistance in getting the truck across the next body of water. It disappeared quickly into the scrub and I continued upon my journey pleasantly shaken but not unduly stirred at having experienced something new.

XVIII - A BRIDGE TOO MANY

When the next impediment presented itself, it too, was novel - a river measuring about fifty metres in width, too wide for a bridge. Instead the only way to ford this obstacle was by pontoon and this would have been relatively easy had the pontoon not been half-submerged rendering itself inoperable. We had no choice; we had to get across the river. The current wasn't swift but the water was deep enough to leave us in no doubt that the vehicle would be swept away if we attempted to drive across. It was going to be necessary to wade into the water and somehow get the thing floating.

No one batted an eyelid at the possibility of the river being infected with bilharzia which affects every body of fresh water in Africa with the exception of Lake Malawi, a good thousand kilometres south. Bilharzia, or schistosomiasis, is not one's disease of choice if remaining healthy and alive is on the agenda. It's

a flatworm that, through a snail, multiplies and searches for a human victim. It attacks the spleen, liver, bladder and the blood vessels. The eggs can eventually clog the vital organs and prove fatal.

Two of the four metal pontoons, which supported the wooden “roadway”, were quite functional, having only small leaks, which, over a decent period, had filled with water. Buckets would do the job without much ado. The other two pontoons were quite a different story. They had holes in them big enough to let the water gush in and fill within half a minute. These then, had to be somehow re-floated. The pontoons were about three metres in length, a metre wide, and about a metre and a half deep.

I lowered myself through a tiny manhole into one of the badly damaged ones and felt for the breach. It was large enough for a good-size stone to fit through. We decided that by covering the hole on the inside with as water-proof material as we could find and jamming it in with rocks, the pontoon and its mate could be re-floated long enough to get us across.

So, with me groping my way around inside of what could be a metal coffin, rocks were passed down to me and I placed them in position. The whole exercise nearly came undone when, just as I was about to take a rock, a wasp flew into the pontoon and, as if it had been programmed, alighted on my thigh and stung me. I recoiled in pain and in so doing the rock, which was now touching my hands, fell and, although missing my foot, put an almighty dent in the base of the pontoon.

Fortunately, the pontoon held and so was my thigh - held that is. My thigh was another story though. I vigorously rubbed sand into the bite in the belief that it would ease the excruciating pain; it didn't and nothing I could think of availed. But time, as we know, heals all wounds and wounds all heels. It must have taken well over an hour for the pain to subside and I was left with one thigh twice as big as the other. It took more than two hours to re-float the pontoon and repair the ramp leading on, but succeed we did, and with ropes and will-power the truck reached the opposite bank. We were on our way yet again.

XIX - SALLY AND SO FORTH

Within a day or so we found another mission. I guess God only knows why they choose these places to peddle their superstitions. Anyway, these missionaries seemed more than happy to see us and invited us for afternoon tea even though it was barely mid-morning. We graciously accepted. Hell! What else were we going to do? It wasn't as if we had a pressing engagement elsewhere -

not one that we could keep anyway. So we had a few hours to relax and take in what the place had to offer.

Naturally enough there were mango trees everywhere but now we welcomed a new discovery - avocado trees. I don't think they were native to the area, not having seen them anywhere else, but they had obviously taken to the climate. Avocados actually originated in southern Mexico and the name comes from Spanish which in turn comes from the indigenous Nahuatl people and refers to testicle, derived from their appearance and the fact that they almost usually grow in pairs. I wonder whether the reader is aware that Mao, killer of 38 million, possessed only one of these items.

There were probably only about ten or so of these trees but the fruit they bore was something one would have to see to believe - some grew as large as a person's head! And tasty! Pure ambrosia! Dave and I picked enough to last us a few days - about thirty. Actually, until this place, I'd never really taken to avocados. Now, if not a connoisseur, I'm without doubt, an unabashed gourmand when it comes to these delectable treasures and I owe it all to Dave. He always showed me by example when he'd had elephant sufficiency.

We also availed ourselves of the chance to acquire more flour to make the bread which was by now approaching palatable. Now experts at bread-making, out came one of the mosquito nets and we sifted it in case there were weevils. In case! Christ, by the time we'd finished we had almost two equal piles, one of flour and the other of weevils! I mean the whole load could move by itself - talk about self-raising flour! Some of these weevils were enormous and that made them easier to spot. We put their pile to one side, choosing the lesser of two weevils. Nonetheless we were desperadoes and it wouldn't have done us much good to complain. We either took it or we didn't. This truly was a country of choice.

I have little recall of the afternoon tea apart from impressions of awkward pretences and insincere niceties in particular from our driver who did for charm what Mussolini did for humility. Two things that I do recall though were a strange animal in a tiny cage which turned out to be a civet cat, and a chimpanzee chained to a post. One of our companions decided to tease the poor creature by waving a towel at it (sometimes a lot of the behaviour exhibited by some of us was pretty questionable but at least it did reconfirm Darwin's misquoted maxim that humans did descend from the trees, even if it was somewhat flattering to us).

Whether by design or by instinct, I couldn't be sure, it wasn't his own towel that our friend was waving at the unfortunate primate. And so, with the chances increased of misadventure overtaking the towel, the prophesy was fulfilled and

the chimp grabbed the sorry object. No cajoling or coercion would result in the chimp giving up the spoils - the atmosphere on the truck as we departed was less than warm.

Poor old Betty. Betty was our other Dutch member of the troop. She always had the invidious task of being the interlocutor with Will, which we all appreciated. She took it all in good spirits. I later spent a romantic week with her when I visited The Netherlands a few weeks after our trip had concluded. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, she was sitting there trying to read a book amid the jolting of the truck and generally minding her own business. Perhaps she did look a little askance at a few of us imbeciles near her who were delighting in the mature pursuit of eating mandarins and compressing the pips between our thumbs and forefingers until the tiny missiles rocketed forth with loose accuracy.

I honestly didn't intend my projectile to go anywhere near her but like a homing pigeon the damned thing flew straight towards her face and, in what seemed like in slow motion, wormed its way into her left nostril. Now this to an outsider may appear at least a little puerile but one really had to be there. There is no way in the world that I'll ever forget the facial contortions she pulled as she tried to dislodge the blessed thing. We laughed so hard we cried.

This hysterical communal laughter, which had now occurred thrice in the last week or so, was a wonderful fillip for us. Somehow Betty didn't appreciate the humour of the situation. But she was a good sport and legal recourse was not sought. I'll always remember her with fondness - she always maintained an air of dignity midst our truck of those whose dignity was more questionable.

XX - NIGHT-TIME HAUNTS

We were now two days and nights away from Bangui. I say this retrospectively because at the time we couldn't be sure when we'd reach the place - there was one more river to cross. The excitement at such a prospect, if not unbearable, was certainly articulated by more than one of my companions. Over the last few weeks we'd come through, intact, our trial by ordeal in some of the worst terrain the country had to offer. Now, if that chimeric concept of justice did exist, we deserved nothing less than the Bangui Hilton with extensive views over the River Gambia to one side and the madman's palace to the other.

We camped in a reasonable clearing in less dense jungle than we'd encountered for some time. The clearing was unexceptional and for that we were grateful. As dusk drew nigh, we settled down to relax after having

completed all our mundane tasks. The jungle was relatively quiet except for the incipient sounds of drums somewhere near which quickly crescendoed into a pulsating ruckus.

Ironically, I found the noise quite soothing, but not so some of the others whose nerves were becoming visibly frayed. (The drums, the mosquitoes, when will they stop! Premature perspiratory dementia. The stuff cheap Hollywood African movies are made of). The rhythm continued unabated through our meal. Faced with the option of either sitting around the campfire or seeking the source of this disturbance or enticement, a few of us chose the latter and set off along some indistinct tracks.

After an hour or so of meandering through the undergrowth we seemed to be no closer. The noise still surrounded us. We were reluctant to wander much further from camp lest we lose our bearings. One can't always be sure of finding other bearings.

I had been lost in the jungle at night before and it was an experience that I wasn't in a hurry to repeat. That was Zambia a few years prior. About ten of us had left our campsite one afternoon and had walked for about a half-hour to a bush pub. Around sunset I'd grown tired of sitting around and decided to head back. I started out in the direction I thought we'd arrived from but I was soon disoriented, not knowing which path I should take.

I must have wandered around for nearly an hour when I saw a light through the bushes. What a relief! I confess that I was becoming more than a little anxious by that stage. I made my way towards the light to discover that it was the straw thatched mud dwelling of one of the locals. At least I could get some help, I thought. As I approached the hut, two dogs suddenly appeared, howling and barking and making a hell of a din.

As if I wasn't in enough bother, now I find two descendants of the Hound of the Baskervilles - ferocious canines with ferocious canines! There wasn't time to change my underwear so I hightailed it back into the bushes, the dogs in pursuit. I'd run about twenty metres before they reached me. But they didn't attack me. They stood there, about a metre away growling and baring their fangs. I was petrified. Within what must have been thirty seconds or so their owner emerged from the darkness and called them to heel. He could readily discern my state and so gave a sympathetic ear to my plight. He knew of the place where we had set up camp and most kindly restored me to the site which just happened to be no more than a five-minute walk in direction from which I'd just wandered.

That experience had evoked in me all my fears of the unknown. We returned to camp amid the continuing drumming to find a couple of the locals

squatting on the camp's periphery, huddled figures motionless in the dwindling ambient light of the fire. They heard us approaching and turned to the source of the rustling. We quickly waved a greeting so as not to alarm them and they muttered the same.

With the source of light behind them it was virtually impossible to discern their faces until we were almost upon them. The shorter of the two stood behind his companion as if to shield himself. Then we saw why. His face was grotesque! He had no lips - from his nose to his chin, the gums were completely exposed revealing not a row of teeth, but a haphazard collection of them protruding in all shapes and angles from his vast tract of gum. I could imagine an accident or disease laying waste to one's gums but the reckless distribution of teeth suggested a birth or genetic defect that in western society would have been surgically corrected long ago and not consigned its unfortunate possessor to the life of a pariah.

I tried transparently hard not to register shock as I smiled and continued my way into camp. So often in Africa, and in the Third World generally, had I seen misfortunes of nature gone untreated. I guess poverty was making natural selection and survival of the fittest that much more visible. That night, so many misshapen, chthonian faces flashed before as I lay in my tent.

The drumming continued until well after midnight and then stopped abruptly. The silence woke me. I pondered our inability to arrive at its source when it dawned upon me (things usually dawned on me just after midnight - prolonged jet-lag) that the sound had not one or two, but many sources, which were probably quite a way removed from where we had ventured. The fact that it had felt so close as to seemingly blanket us was a combination of its many sources, and the ease with which sound travels on such still nights in the jungle.

XXI - VIEW OF THE CATARACT

The following day we passed through Bangassou, the nation's second city. I suppose it had redeeming features but I failed to notice them. Whatever it had, it didn't augur too well for Bangui, the capital which still lay some days further down the track. The four words which come to me when I cast my mind back to Bangassou are hot, sticky, dusty and relief, the latter referring to our rapid passage through the place.

Our path then led us past Kembe Falls. They were marked on our Michelin map which by now was taking on the appearance of a relic contemporaneous with the Dead Sea Scrolls - it had the dirt and grime of thirty countries coating

it. Still, maps such as these weren't always easy to get hold of and, by necessity, we treasured it.

Kembe Falls reminded me somewhat of the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland in their grandeur. While the Swiss cataracts are a famous tourist attraction, very few people outside and not many more inside C.A.R. were aware of Kembe's existence. Try finding them on a map. The only reference we had of them was some vague recollection of a fellow traveller that another traveller had been swept to her death after bathing in the seemingly innocuous shallows just to the side of the falls.

Being mindful of this we nevertheless stripped off and immersed ourselves in the tepid waters, the strong current nudging and keeping us alert. It was the first time that we'd been able to soak ourselves in water for nearly two months! Two months might seem a long time to immerse oneself in water but we were not dealing with ordinary people here.

The water temperature must have been about 27 degrees Celsius, a cool bath. It had been nearly four months since I'd felt water this warm and that was almost a continent away. Not only did the falls afford us the opportunity for a good wash and in Boris's case, a bad wash, they also provided us with the chance to wash our clothes. The dirt that came out of these garments would have to be seen to be believed. People downstream must have thought that a hill had been washed into the river judging by the amount of soil that our clothes disgorged. That couple of hours there, were just what we needed in the sultriness that was weighing heavily upon us.

XXII - JUST CAPITAL

And so to Bangui. My mind was at odds as to what we might encounter. We had expected to be there for a couple of days while we arranged our onward visas. Little did we know! Thus far, C.A.R. had appealed to us as a fantastic place to leave. The country was redolent of little else other than hardship, corruption and despair. But the book suggested that Bangui, unlike all other towns in the country, was shady and, ad hoc ergo proctor hoc, pleasant. I don't remember driving into the place - we headed straight for our camping spot with, you guessed it, the River Bangui on one side and Bokassa's palace perched on its eyrie high behind us. Seemed idyllic.

Alongside the palace and as far as the eye could see, extended a verdant backdrop of jungle, which would shelter us from the late afternoon sun. We pitched our tents on the sun-baked clay in the middle of the two-acre expanse

that had been incongruously designated a camping area. The heat there was searing but with the river not two minutes away no one seemed particularly discountenanced.

Blocking a direct path to the river was the tallest building in the country, the *Hotel Roc*, also known as the *Roc Club* for some obscure reason (who would've thought?). It was a modern affair complete with a number of bars and an enormous swimming pool. Judging from the cars that serviced it, the place was obviously a Mecca for the rich and famous and, for a day here and there henceforth, the poor and scruffy.

We quickly ascertained that we were welcome in the hotel recreation areas at the seemingly pitiful cost of \$2.50 per day. As apparently meagre as the sum was, very few of us could afford the luxury of the oasis two days running. Money was running short in these times of unexpected delays and I don't remember anyone possessing a credit card - no one was planning on being away for less than six months. My finances managed to hold out until I finally succumbed to borrowing in Morocco, two weeks short of London.

As I mentioned above, our main business in Bangui was not taking in the sights but trying to arrange visas to The Cameroons as quickly as possible in order to make up for lost time. Here is an example of the way in which bureaucracy works. First, endless hours are spent filling out forms replete with inane questions. Then they are returned to the consul where they are studied, right way up, upside down, back to front in order to have those waiting believe that some cerebration is actually taking place (clearly, they were trained by Afghani border officials).

After that is done, and it can take more a day depending on the mood of the officials, one must then go to an office on the other side of town to receive an official stamp. That's all the other office does; stamp the application! It probably never occurred to them that a drawer in any desk could house the stamps and so obviate such a multiplicity of wastage.

Once this stamp has been acquired, one must go back to the first place and present it. Now this could probably transpire in about a day if all the wheels in this ridiculous charade were in place. The trouble is, that if there were any wheels in the first place they have long since fallen off.

The consul has to be there to sign the documents and that is rare. Often, he's gone to the toilet and won't be back until the day after next. Often the offices are closed for lunch, which commences soon after breakfast, and doesn't open

again that day. And so on and so forth. We spent eleven quixotic days in Bangui chasing those elusive visas.

XXIII - DAYLIGHT COME AND ME WAN' GO HOME

Once again we settled down into the humdrum of daily life in Bangui although, I must confess, it didn't sink to the level of the quotidian existence of Obo. At least here there would be things to do.

The plethora of onlookers as we encamped was not unusual. Wherever we stopped, whether in town or just on the roadside, if there were people within walking distance, the place was often overrun with onlookers. Naturally in the city of Bangui there was an overabundance. There was also little or no interaction between the groups. They were inquisitive and we were curious and that was generally where it stopped.

Big centres, of course, were a lot less friendly than smaller stopping points and crime, by its nature, occurs more often in such places. Faces are less friendly, there is a far greater degree of alienation, and especially in the Third World, desperation can be seen everywhere. Bangui was no exception. Fuelled by an unconscious awareness of this as well as some vague, and ultimately unfounded, rumours of violence in the city, our driver demanded that we post a 24-hour guard on the campsite.

Initially it made some sort of sense but after a day or two, when it was obvious from the dramatic fall in the number of onlookers that they were simply a passive collection of passers-by, such orchestrated vigilance was clearly unnecessary. The only people that did cause some minor concern were a few hawkers of local handicrafts who approached in the daylight hours for logical reasons, to ply their trade.

Groups of two were designated to complete a two-hour shift everyday with every second day being a night duty. With one almost well disguised exception the rota was fairly constructed. The driver's gal, it seemed, although having been assigned a couple of late evening shifts, never quite managed to figure on the midnight to dawn shift as opposed to the rest of the crew. When this was brought to his attention he lapsed into another episode of paranoia, threatening to kick a few of us off the truck which was roughly within the ambit of his powers as expedition leader but in no way could be justified.

A couple of companions considered wiring London expressing concern over the guy's stability but this was quickly overridden in the assumption that he

was controllable. One of our group had taken an immediate dislike to this fellow as far back as Joburg – he claimed it would save time. So bad enough was left alone.

This is not to say that he had no redeeming features. I know I've given him a hard time. He was a good driver and a damned fine mechanic. He simply had problems in dealing with people given the pressure of the job a little and that little birdie who was constantly in his ear. Many of us had given up around six months of our lives to embark on this adventure and those same many had the right to be a little disappointed in some of the episodes which could have been so easily avoided. Another time and another place could have seen us as friends.

Indignance with the driver aside, the guard system was implemented and carried out without a hitch. During our stay of nearly two weeks, no incident was reported. Strangely, I actually enjoyed the two post-midnight shifts I was rostered onto. It was, apart from some of my early morning walks, a rare time during which I had some space, both physically and mentally. The other guard and I sat about fifty metres apart at opposite sides of the camp in order to afford a total view of the site. Occasionally we would stretch our legs and stroll around the perimeter and engage in a cursory exchange but generally it was a time for solitude and keeping one's own counsel.

I actually wrote a couple of meaningful letters to friends who were also on the road, in Europe, as well as a few postcards. It's interesting, the insights that come to the fore in those quiet hours after everyone else has turned in. Sitting wasn't particularly comfortable – there were no seats available so one had to make do with whatever was at one's disposal or ingenuity.

The object upon which I sat was a piece of wood shaped roughly like a "T", the crosspiece being flat. I had spotted a native carrying it in northern Kenya and swapped a t-shirt for it. It was, in fact, a pillow! When the natives rested, they lay their head on the cross piece which was about six inches above ground level. This basically solved the problem of insects crawling onto one's head. I had recognised the potential of this fascinating contrivance as a seat and was happy to snap it up. It proved a most judicious purchase through both jungle and desert. It now enjoys a well-earned retirement as an ornament in my home in Sydney.

The nights were also a wonderful relief from the oppressive heat of the day. That's outside the tents, of course. It took probably half the night for the heat to dissipate. Having dark blue flysheets didn't make things any easier. There were frequently times when I needed a nap during the day and more than often, I crept into my tent only to find myself in a lather of sweat and somewhat irritable

several minutes later. So, unless one could sleep well and sufficiently during the nights, there was no relief to be found in the daylight hours.

XXIV - CAUGHT, PANTS DOWN

Personal hygiene was not a problem at the campsite. For those availing themselves of the *Roc Club*, showers, albeit cold (but who cared), were accessible. For those not splurging on these modern amenities, the river was only a minute's further stroll. The only problem with using that site for one's ablutions was that hippos were rumoured to be more than a nuisance, the latest casualty being a traveller, who had her leg severely mangled by a less than welcoming 'river horse'.

Personally, I never saw one although a couple of my cohorts did. There was, of course, a row of latrines in the *Roc Club* which was handy if one had become an honorary member for the day. Otherwise, there was the bush behind the campsite. All at night used this and long before we arrived it was far less than salubrious – it had turned, surprisingly unappealingly, into mini-swamp, a haven to vermin and pestilence.

Braving this miasma was to be avoided almost to the cost of constipation. Not that we were pusillanimous by any account. Our preferred method of toileting in the jungle was to head into the bush with a shovel. In fact, it was not unpleasant squatting for however long one required, surrounded by the sounds of nature.

Here in Bangui, because the escarpment rose very quickly and steeply, that was clearly impossible. So we had to centralise the activity in a fashion. One found whatever privacy one could in this small tract of swamp, but finding a few square feet of available ground was becoming increasingly difficult. However, due to Robin's misfortune, that problem was soon solved.

Honorary membership to the *Roc Club* for any day was designated by a piece of wool that one tied to the cord of one's swimming costume. The colour was changed daily to prevent deceit – like it was impossible to buy cotton of the same colour in Bangui! Since on one particular day Robin's funds didn't allow him the luxury of the club's amenities, Dave and I shared our 'badges' with him.

Unfortunately, he was found out and a minor diplomatic wrangle ensued. I still can't imagine how on earth his subterfuge was discovered. Thankfully a rapprochement was quickly established after the three of us had agreed to dig a more acceptable latrine behind our campsite and to ease up on the toilet in the

hotel foyer. Robin did the 'right thing' before Dave and I had a chance to pitch in, by single-handedly excavating a hole about six feet deep and about four feet square.

The walls were perfectly straight - truly a masterful job. It was going to be a shame to defile it. Planks were placed across it and a shelter of palm fronds was erected for privacy. Within a day everyone came to sit and ponder over this wonderful engineering marvel. Finally, there existed a contrivance that was user friendly. And within a few days of that, I happened to glance in, and to my horrible fascination, observed that the entire floor of the abyss was nothing more than a seething, writhing mass of mustard-coloured maggots. I shuddered then and I shudder even now and sometimes for the same reason.

XXV - CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE BEST KIND

The *Roc Club* was truly a blessing. I must have spent four or five days in and around the pool. It had been close to four months since I'd left South Africa and I hadn't known a woman, at least not in the biblical sense, since that time. In fact, being on the road in Africa in a kind of mobile enclave, the chances of meeting anyone for a fleeting *affaire de coeur*, or at least *de corps*, were generally confined either to within the group or to chance meetings which were few and far between.

Chance meetings most often consisted of trucks passing in the night whereby two overland groups would just happen to decide on camping in the same clearing, a happenstance occasioned upon us three or four times thus far. Other chance meetings would occur when we, as was now the case, had to spend more than a couple of days in a place usually due to the wheels of the local bureaucracy turning ever so slowly.

There were very few women in and around the pool at the *Roc Club*. Mostly they were the wives of visiting diplomats or businessmen. I do remember noticing the beautiful turquoise of one lady's eyes as she floated past. She returned my glance for a few meaningful seconds before hopping out and reclining her deck chair with, who I surmised, was her *Lothario*. I was undeniably entranced by her and let my eyes wander back to her as often as I hoped would not be too offensive. Surprisingly enough our eyes often met. God! The whole *Roc Club* must have been able to hear my hormones grinding back into gear. That was on the third morning of our stay.

I wandered back to the campsite for lunch feeling that I'd extended the limits of frustration to new boundaries. I was ready to crack. Hell, I would've signed a confession to starting the Great Fire of London if I'd been asked nicely. I could just see the headlines: "PEPYS WRONG! Brandon of Old Pudding Lane sets house ablaze while reading pornography by candlelight!" (Was it the candle or the friction?)

After the midday repast, in lieu of anything more enterprising, I sauntered back towards the pool. There, in living flesh and technicolour, was the woman I'd been ogling, walking towards the campsite. She smiled as she walked past and I reciprocated with "Hi" - an in-depth monologue before continuing towards the pool, kicking myself all the way.

As I reached the portals of the hotel I turned around and noticed her entering the area on which another truck had camped close to ours. I couldn't believe it. She, a fellow traveller! Inside the hotel I spotted the guy she was talking to earlier, dressed in a suit and speaking to a couple of others likewise appalled. My spirits literally soared (spirits can do things like this, mine in particular because they have only a rudimentary understanding of the laws of gravity). I sat by the pool contemplating my prospects and every so often sought refuge in the pool to cool my growing ardour.

I had chosen a seat in the pool area with my back to the river and facing the pool entrance in case the lovely lady should return. And, finally, she did, and none too soon - I felt as if I was breaking out in carbuncles. She was with two others and they deposited their belongings near ours before seeking the relief from the oppressive midday heat in the pool. Well, before long they emerged and returned to their towels and that's when she re-established eye contact with me.

I held her glance for that few seconds and I knew and she knew that something had to follow. I proffered another "Hi". I'd now been aware of her existence for maybe an hour now and all I'd uttered to her was two words and they were both the same. (Did she think that I had a slow stutter?)

There were now seven of us, my three companions and two of hers. We introduced ourselves. She was Louise from northern Quebec and I was lovestruck from *Too Long Without*. I can't remember her friends' names; they entered my ears, bypassed my memory and headed straight for oblivion.

They too were engaged in a trip across the Dark Continent but were heading in the opposite direction, from North to South. Unlike us, they weren't delayed in Bangui and would be heading across the river into Zaire a few days hence. I had no time to waste, not that I could have exerted a great deal of control over my libido anyway.

Louise and I got on swimmingly for the rest of the afternoon - it became imperative that we meet somewhere that evening. We decided that soon after we'd finished our camp meals that we'd meet, along with a dozen or so others, at the campsite and wander over to the *Roc Club* in search of an initial diversion.

The evening camp meal was as unexciting as ever although I couldn't help but feel that old thrill of anticipation which seemed to engulf me, rendering me oblivious to anything else. There was no point in rushing, seven-thirty was the appointed hour (an hour away) and nothing I could do, would bring our tryst any closer.

Finally, we all convened at around seven-thirty, the rag-tag bunch who had somehow, miraculously, dredged up clothes enough to make most of us look half respectable. But not so our Louise, who with her floral outfit and some sort of flower nestling in her raven hair, drew my breath away; she was absolutely stunning and I did my best to hide my enchantment from the others. No one was aware of the sparks that were flying between us. Well, maybe. Golly gosh, it was almost like being on a first date! It had been such a long time that I had been so engulfed by such an air of anticipation.

On our arrival we discovered that there was a disco next door in the Safari Club, more than likely, the second tallest building in the country, but far less impressive, although it did possess a quaint little outdoor restaurant cleverly sculptured around the rocks adjacent to the river.

At around eight, the noise from the disco got going in earnest but it was hardly enticing. Perhaps I was hoping for something a little more romantic instead of the thump, thump of the percussion and the discordant clatter of badly tuned guitars that assailed us. We could see already that quite a few people had arrived, festooned gaily in colours that were more reminiscent of the West Indies than of the Africa we knew.

Half-an-hour later about a dozen of us took the lift to the top floor ready for whatever, but diversion nonetheless. The top floor was actually the roof of the *Safari Club*. About half was open-air and the rest being the disco itself. The night was almost pitch black. We could hear the river maybe ten storeys below and barely make out the jetty where the pirogues that had ferried a seemingly endless tide of people across to Zaire during the daylight, had been secured.

The cost of admission to the disco was obviously aimed at the well-to-do, the haves - we were basically the 'have-nots but wouldn't mind just a bit if it wouldn't be too much trouble'. A cursory glance at the interior wasn't particularly beckoning so it wasn't surprising that the group unanimously decided that

socialising down at the campsite had more to offer. Well, almost unanimously. Louise and I tacitly decided that we'd hang around a little longer.

The rest of the troops had departed and the two of us stood there for a while getting to know each other a little better. We wandered over, in the darkness, to the edge of the building and gazed into the nothingness that lay before us.

The proximity of a desirable female was really starting to get the better of me. My hormones were at boiling point! How long could I hold out? Well, it wasn't long. I took her in my arms and gave full vent to my passions. To my relief she came to me willingly and responded hungrily.

Without becoming too explicit, suffice it to say that we probably gave "love on a rooftop" a good working over. And over the next four days my tent and the swimming pool suddenly became more alluring. It was all so wonderful. The rest of the hardship now seemed worth it. I wonder, is there any better tonic than infatuation and passion?

Then four days later she was gone: across the river into Zaire and south into new experiences. How strange, I thought. We exchanged addresses but, I think, somehow, we both knew, that this was the end of our precious, brief time together. I never saw her again.

XXVI - DAY BY DAY

We'd now been in Bangui for close to a week now and from all reports we were no closer to receiving our Cameroon visas. Reasons were proffered to cover bureaucratic ineptitude and we accepted them with a resignation that was a little disturbing. I guess enthusiasm can take just so much.

My impressions of Bangui in no way should reflect what the city, or town, was really like. We spent the majority of our time in our little tourist corridor spending only about an average of an hour a day in the town itself and that being restricted to the market area and the business district that lay adjacent to each other.

Of the suburbs, we knew virtually nothing other than the almost subliminal impressions garnered as we drove into the city and out for the last time. In retrospect I find it difficult to comprehend that we could have spent so long in one place without exploring it. I suppose we were simply temporarily worn out, jaded and impervious to adventure. The vague ennui had us in its grip.

Our camp was situated about the best part of an hour's walk from the markets. The truck drove in to the markets early every morning to pick up food for the day. Generally, because it left so early, only the cooks of the day bothered to make the journey. Those who desired to make the trip later in the day, when all the shops were open, had to do so by foot.

It didn't take long to discover that the shops would have little interest to us. There was only one bookshop in the place and I soon discovered, to my disappointment, that one could not even buy a newspaper in English, let alone a novel. Of course, there were any number of books in French, the C.A.R. being one of the many modern countries that comprised French-West Africa in that bygone era. Those engaged in window shopping, would be better off purchasing a window, while prices in the two tiny "supermarkets" were extortionate and aimed obviously at the French ex-pats and foreign moneyed tourists - in short, not us.

There was one boutique that claimed several of us during our shopping forays. A solitary patisserie stood close to some mechanics or some such workshops. Un petit gateau every couple of days was just the frisson many of us needed to overcome the tedium and flagging spirits. It's all really quite pathetic isn't it? Even the fresh fruit and vegetables that the market offered were fillips of sorts.

Finances were always a worry. Most of the dehydrated food had fallen into the "Oh no, not again!" category, and the muesli had become a haven for small grubs. So parsimonious had the driver become that rather than ditch the muesli, he had it toasted - it actually wasn't too bad. After all, protein is protein.

I probably ventured to town nearly every day. It broke the routine nicely as well as serving two other purposes. First, I needed to visit the post office to dispatch my daily correspondences. I suppose these could have been posted en masse had it not been for the second purpose of visiting the town. This was, in one word, Camembert. One of the troops had discovered, in the supermarket, some cans of this delicacy that had been imported from France. The French could never quite let go.

Plat du Camembert became our lunch. Every day Dave and I and whoever else, walked an hour into town, bought a can between us, purchased a French stick each, and trudged to camp in the midday heat before spending five minutes devouring our hard-earned treasures. It was only through our diversion to the post office that we partially justified, in our own minds, the whole exercise.

XXVII - POST WITHOUT HASTE

Visiting the post office in Bangui was no ordinary experience either. The hawkers outside the building, whom one might expect to see selling postcards and such like, were selling butterfly products. Most of the trade seemed to be in individually cellophane-wrapped specimens of local lepidoptera complete with a little typewritten label denoting their scientific names.

The other wares for the offering were beautifully presented montages of butterfly wings depicting African scenes. These were selling for about a dollar each. Some months later, while travelling through Canada, I happened upon the same pieces selling for thirty dollars each - just a little mark up on the original.

We had been warned about the post offices in Africa. One had to carefully supervise to make sure the stamps had been franked before consigning them to their immediate fate. Too many stories of letters failing to reach their destinations had apprised us over the previous months. I even made a habit of writing partially over the stamps in a further effort to invalidate them. It was important to me and I guess to others to have letters get through to the addressee. Nearly all the missives I penned in Bangui and the C.A.R. in general were written in solitude and most of my outpourings, reflective and heartfelt. So, I exhibited no small degree of solicitude in supervising their dispatch. I wanted to take no chances. Not one letter ever reached its destination.

I recalled, five years earlier, when I was in Panama that I'd despatched nineteen postcards to people back home. Just to let people know, that even though I was thousands of kilometres away, they were still in my mind. Those postcards, too, never found their way home. I guess, on both occasions, I remained out of sight and out of mind.

XXVIII - BOTTOMS UP

I don't know why it never dawned upon me earlier. It should have been obvious that Dave had become very fidgety - he just couldn't sit still. That should have been enough to alert me to the fact that he had some new kind of irritation, irritations being legion for us. In fact, it wasn't until he started looking for a pharmacy that it became apparent that he had a deep-seated problem - I guess if one has ever suffered from haemorrhoids anywhere (geographically, that is). Anatomically it can be awkward enough, but for one's deepest-darkest to be so afflicted in the middle of 'deepest-darkest' cannot be readily appreciated.

There must have been three or four pharmacies in Bangui and Dave visited each one. Did they have 'Preparation H'? was his plaintive request. The reason it was called such, I surmised, was that in Canada they didn't know how to spell the dreaded 'haemorrhoids' so they just called it 'H'. Actually, it's probably a little less disconcerting to ask for Preparation H than to announce one is having trouble with one's haemorrhoids for all and sundry to overhear.

Finally, he despaired. First, he couldn't speak French so his attempts at enquiry had us close to tears with laughter. And second, when finally, they did understand his rough translation, they still didn't know what the hell he was referring to anyway. So what then? His next gambit broke me up completely. He had to resort to charades. It was truly a revelation to see the level of desperation of a grown man resorting to pantomiming a suppository. Thank Christ he wasn't after a condom; this was bad enough!

Well, after much embarrassment he finally got what he wanted but I couldn't help wondering what left him more uncomfortable, the affliction itself or the shopping trip.

XXIX – ENDGAME

Mark and Barbara, in a rare and spontaneous show of adventure, decided they would catch a pirogue to take them across the river to Zaire. Mark, the fly killer, Barbara, a teacher from Victoria who was on Sabbatical, and I decided to monitor our peregrinations over the next few years in a meaningless race to see who could visit one hundred countries first.

Those were relatively early days - I was leading with about sixty or so and the others were close behind. I just didn't feel the imperative to spend an hour crossing the river only to be turned back which is what befell the others. Still, they both counted it and it entered their passports. It wasn't until four years later when I was following a band of gorillas in north-western Rwanda that I ventured probably a kilometre or two inside Zaire. I finally reached my hundredth country in early '85 while Mark was in his high nineties and Barbara, her seventies.

Oddly, our time in the C.A.R. came to an end abruptly. As each day had drifted languidly into the following one, so too had another day commenced. The truck had left for the markets for the day's provisions and would stop off at the Cameroon Consul en route back to camp. Nothing remarkable was happening in the camp - people were going about their chores silently, preparing for nothing and expecting as much. At about ten o'clock the truck returned, heralding its

arrival with a couple of loud blasts on the horn, not its usual practice. The visas had been granted.

One hour later we were driving out of Bangui - forever. There were no goodbyes. Our leaving went virtually unnoticed except for the faces of some of the locals who returned our waves with waves of their own as well as somewhat bemused grins which broke out into that ubiquitous African smile. I remember it elicited in me, for them, a profound sense of pity as they eked out existences midst the squalor and hopelessness bequeathed to them by just another African despot and probably, courtesy of a colonial past, the Europeans had so kindly foisted upon them. After all, we only had to stay in their blighted country for one month.



***OUT OF
AFRICA,
INTO ASIA***

FOUR
***A PASSAGE TO
AFGHANISTAN
(October 1977)***

“Today Iran is one of the most stable countries in a notoriously unstable area of the world.”

- Jack Jackson & Ellen Crampton (1976)

And then, of course, just over a year later, Jimmy Carter, whilst addressing the Shah and others, went on to say “Iran is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world.” Stable indeed! Troubled areas of the world? Who would have detected that? There’s no record of what Jimmy said a year later when the US Embassy was stormed heralding the hostage crisis. The hostages were actually released on the same day that Reagan became president. That was no coincidence; the CIA was instrumental in delaying their release until just the right time. Who would’ve thought?

I - STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Less than a year after Jack and Ellen penned those less than prescient words, there we were, in Iran. We’d entered the country, arriving in Reziyah, after travelling overland through Turkey. Barbara, one of our companions, without announcement, suddenly turned down an alley, strode quickly for about fifty metres and stopped. Three young girls, whom she had purposely overtaken, continued walking over the wizened mud towards her. As they approached,

I noticed Barbara peering searchingly into their faces before initiating a conversation. The conversation was in French and somewhat halting.

Jennie and I approached. Jennie was a vivacious, witty and gentle woman I had met in Sydney a couple of years earlier. We got married just before we headed overseas where we spent five months never realising that in another two years, we would be going our separate ways.

On noticing our presence Barbara excused herself and turned to us to offer an explanation of the preceding events. It seems that we had walked past the girls a little earlier in the Royal Bazaar when she thought she saw a chai pendant suspended from the neck of the tallest girl. The chai is a Jewish or Hebrew figure symbolising life and is often worn as an amulet. Barbara said nothing thinking it was probably a charm depicting a similar symbol from the Koran. These symbols abounded in Isfahan, the major city south of Tehran.

She quickly dismissed the idea that there were Jews living here, especially some who were willing to advertise themselves in even such a subtle manner as this. It wasn't until Barbara had spied the trio again some fifteen minutes later that curiosity had overtaken her, enjoining her, in turn, to overtake the girls. To her surprise she discovered, on their approach, that not only was the tallest one wearing a chai but so too were the others. At this point she decided to instigate a conversation. She spoke no Farsi and it was a safe bet that they spoke no English so she decided the Lingua Franca would probably be Yiddish, a language not unfamiliar to many Jews all over the world.

Sadly, they didn't understand her but made no attempt to move away. It was the youngest who solved the problem by asking Barbara if she spoke French, a language studied at school in Iran. Barbara, a New Yorker, whom we met in London and who was to travel with us over the next few months, had lived in Europe for a few years. She responded happily that she did speak some French. How frustrating would it have been to be so close to discovering their story but missing out because of the language barrier. Barbara was very comfortable with French, much more so than the girls.

My knowledge of French is less than a working one but I can usually understand the gist of what's transpiring. Jennie unfortunately never studied languages so she was dependent upon Barbara and me.

The girls whose ages were twelve, ten and eight were walking home from school, having finished for the day - they did the morning shift. Their skin was unusually pale - delicate, translucent. The oldest and youngest children had fine black hair cropped short while the second child had bright red hair, a rarity in

these parts. Their eyes were of anthracite which lent to their faces a haunting sort of beauty, particularly in the oldest one.

II - HOUSE AND GARDEN

Soon we were all heading in the direction of the girls' home. After a few sotto voce exchanges between the girls, we were invited to visit. We wandered through a series of alleys (how would we ever find our way out?) until we stopped at a large door standing in relief on an almost continuous wall of what appeared to be constructed of a kind of smooth stucco. This wall was punctuated every five metres or so by other doors, a few of which were ornately carved.

As we entered, we were greeted by a half a dozen chickens and a goat foraging around a courtyard measuring about five by eight metres (it was a damned big goat! No, just joking. It was the courtyard). It too was carpeted mostly in mud except for the odd tuft of grass or litter. At the far end of this courtyard was the residence, a two-storey construction. Could this be opulence, I wondered?

The youngest of the trio had dashed inside obviously to tell whoever was there of our arrival, so by the time we'd reached the entrance to the house five new faces presented themselves. These comprised, we were informed, of the grandmother, mother and father, a young boy of about three years and a male infant.

A buzz of excitement soon engulfed the entire family as they busied themselves in preparation of what would be afternoon tea. Mindful of our presence the two older girls tried to keep us entertained but the rapid switches between Persian and French left me completely bewildered.

The downstairs, as far as I could discern, entailed the room in which we now found ourselves, which I would call a family room, and a small and, by western standards, primitive kitchen. Upstairs, as we were later informed were the living quarters - three bedrooms which accommodated eight people.

We were given cushions and motioned to sit around a low wooden table on one side of the room. The room itself was almost devoid of decoration apart from a couple of Jewish symbols and etchings on the wall. The floorboards hadn't been treated and a couple of well-worn rugs covered some strategic sections of the room.

The fare was simple - tea and quartered apples. I only discovered years later that by serving these items that it was impossible to offend one's dietary rules, religious or otherwise.

The mother, who was probably in her forties, busied herself constantly by tidying things around the room and making sure there was an endless supply on the table. She also mumbled to herself incessantly. The children seemed a little uncomfortable by her behaviour and distanced themselves psychologically from her. Once they realised that we were aware of the situation they made an attempt to indicate, by putting a finger to their temples, that they considered her to be mad - that was the word they used in French - 'fou'. And short of showing disapproval, the husband gave every indication of concurring with the girls' assessment. Still, she was always smiling as she fussed over and around us and never gave us any reason for concern.

We spent probably an hour engaged in light conversation - attempts at anything deeper proved either beyond the language barrier or beyond the scope of the young girls' comprehension since they were the only ones with whom direct conversation was possible. They did act as interpreters between their father and us but I'm sure much was lost in the process. They did an amazing job nonetheless. Their grandmother sat there with a benign, welcoming look on her face the entire time, probably just glad of the company.

But soon the smiles outnumbered the words and we realised it was time to leave. I think they, too, understood our encounter was drawing to a close. So much had been left unexplored and unsaid but better, I surmised, to leave at this point rather than to do so with a sense of relief.

Barbara referred to her watch announcing that we had to return to camp and we made our departure amidst warmth, feeling both richer and sadder for the experience. We didn't even bother to have them write their address for us - I guess we all understood the futility of trying to correspond. I think we were all content to have the afternoon encapsulated and consigned to a special place in our hearts and minds. Today, so far removed in time and place, I still wonder from time to time about their fate in a country and region which grew increasingly hostile to them and their kin. A heaviness descends upon me at these times.

III - CAUGHT BETWEEN IRAQ AND A HARD PLACE

We soon found ourselves back in the maidan, the central square which despite its modernity, still retained the charm and atmosphere of an ancient Muslim city - so said a glossy brochure that one of our group had procured. Modern it was, but as far as retaining the charm and cetera, to me, this was not evident. Two of the things that made an immediate impression upon me about Rezyiah and Isfahan were their cleanliness and order. In Reziyah street guttering appeared for the first time in 500 kilometres, and there was a conspicuous lack of dirt and litter in the streets of both places. A pervading atmosphere of sterility seemed to possess them. And missing was the hustle and bustle with which I'd come to associate and give character to these places.

Of course, once one scratched below the surface and wandered a few streets away from the centres, they almost magically sprang to life. Never mind the dust and the apparent lack of order. Here, life was taking place. Here resided the quiddity of the Middle East. Here was its soul.

The maidan was spacious, bounded on all sides by mosques and unimposing buildings which, to the town planners' credit, didn't detract from the sense of relative peacefulness found therein. There were a number of arcades and chai (tea) houses but surprisingly few people.

A few of us ventured into a chai house to partake of the local coffee. The owner/waiter (I guess they are one and the same), a stout, hoary fellow dressed in local garb, greeted us effusively and directed us to a low table surrounded by sumptuous cushions into which we gladly sank. It was no coincidence that the table happened to be in the middle of the room rendering us the cynosure of all eyes. At least they were smiling eyes (if not Irish).

Our host didn't understand English which didn't present any problems since 'coffee,' and its multifarious forms are almost universally recognised. It was just like the Turkish equivalent - rich with the dregs comprising about a quarter of the small cup. But it was satisfying. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had real coffee. Probably it was as far back as Cappadocia or even Istanbul.

What we tried next was a first for all of us. Hookahs weren't an unfamiliar sight to me (at least not with this spelling). I'd first become aware of them ten years prior to this trip on my first visit to Turkey and they'd caught my eye then. They are the large tobacco pipes used in the Middle East. They stand up to a metre in height and are made of glass, wood and metal, and usually ornamented in arabesques. To witness a smoke-filled room crowded with men sitting silently

in small groups sharing these contrivances was a source of fascination for me. Apart from the nicotine, to my knowledge no other drug is generally present but I was always amazed at the air of serenity that typified these gatherings.

Naturally I didn't hesitate when the invitation to partake was extended. I'm afraid however, that all I managed to do was cough and splutter much to the amusement of the onlookers who had been watching expectantly, I suppose, for just such a response. Anyway, I'd tried it so that was that. I had no desire to master this ancient pastime so I dispatched it in the direction of one of my friends who was likewise reduced to a paroxysm of spluttering. Each of us, in turn, tried and achieved similar results to the continuing and unabating amusement of the regulars. In the end we resumed our coffees and they resumed their silent camaraderie.

IV - TAKING A BRIDGE TOO FAR

Only two constructions in Isfahan remain in my mind a decade after my visit. The first is the *Shah Abbas Hotel* - the most modern in the city. That fact in itself is inconsequential. Let me backtrack a little.

When I was in London preparing for this trip, I purchased a number of books to read for both pleasure and information. One of these books fulfilled both purposes: James Michener's *Caravans*, a novel set against the backdrop of Afghanistan. As it transpired, the novel was certainly not one of his better attempts but it did paint a reliable picture of geographical, and to a lesser extent, social conditions we encountered. I was reading this novel at the time we entered Iran.

During our wanderings around Isfahan we inevitably arrived at the *Shah Abbas Hotel* into which we dutifully wandered for a quick inspection. We could have been anywhere. Apart from the few arabesque decorations this place was like any other hotel anywhere else. Even the Muzak that almost subliminally issued forth and helped create a safe and sterile atmosphere. Emblazoned on the notice board in the foyer was the announcement that Anthony Quinn and (the delightful) Jennifer O'Neill were currently bunking down there whilst filming, you guessed it, *Caravans*.

It was at that point that I probably uttered something meaningful such as "What a coincidence!" to which no one responded, before we moved on to other eminently forgettable landmarks.

Oh, and did I mention the song that was playing as we entered the hotel? Well, obviously not. Irving Berlin's standard *Always* was wafting through the atrium. A bit of a nothing song in the scheme of his oeuvre, but one that has special significance for me. You see, and here comes another digression, my father had told me many years before that this ditty was the one that he and my mother had chosen as their wedding waltz so many years before. No matter that the song wasn't a waltz notwithstanding.

Probably about ten years later I thought I should buy a record with that song because that's what I did with music; find an album for one particular song, buy it, and then expose myself to whatever else was contained on that album. I found a version sung by Patsy Cline. I'm not sure whether I'd heard of her, but what the hell. So, I came to really like a lot of Patsy's work to add to my burgeoning eclectic collection of music.

Thirty years later, late at night, as I was spending the last few hours of my father's life with him, I found myself quietly chanting the song over and over to the shell that was once so vital. Could he hear me? I don't know, but I kept it up for a good hour or so... "I'll be loving you, always..." The father that I'd spent the first few decades of my life in conflict with. And now, this. Tenderness. I remained beside his bed for a few more silent hours, just the three of us - Dad, me and the unwelcome stranger who hovered all through the room, choking us, and who was to take him from us in the early hours of the morning. For years after his passing, I couldn't relate this episode to anyone without choking up. So poignant.

The other landmark that sticks in my memory is the Khajhu Bridge which also doubles as a dam. It contains about two dozen arches, the use of which has imprinted itself on me. We were with an English-speaking local who explained to us that if we bothered to visit the bridge at night, we would witness many visitors. Apparently heterosexual activity out of wedlock was virtually non-existent but not so for homosexuals. This site, then, was a place that young men would frequent to do... Well, whatever tickled their fancies.

So that was it - my memories of Isfahan. Oh, and I shouldn't forget the pistachios which we bought by the kilo for a few cents and which managed to ruin our finger nails over the next few weeks as we endeavoured to prise them open.

V - ONE MAN'S MEDE IS ANOTHER MAN'S PERSIAN

Our stay in Isfahan lasted perhaps a week before we struck south for Persepolis, the only place apart from Tehran that I'd heard of. Persepolis, built by Darius I in 518 B.C. was the capital of his Persian Empire. This was going to be a treat.

We arrived late in the afternoon. The first thing I noticed was not Persepolis itself but the accommodation available to the tourist. There is an Intercontinental Hotel as well as well as the Shah's tent complex built to commemorate 2500 years of monarchy. We bought some cokes in the cool bar of the hotel.

Staying in the hotel was never a consideration. We camped, instead, in the shadows of the ruins. And they were magnificent. We spent the best part of the next day just roaming around imbibing a sense of what it must have been like over two millennia ago. Persepolis lasted until Alexander laid waste to it almost two centuries later. It wasn't difficult to feel in the giant stones that had been hewn to construct this fabulous place more than just a sense of history. I wondered who else, over that seemingly enormous time span, had touched these stones and pillars and statues just as I was doing in 1977, that blink of time. That wasn't particularly difficult - over 200 years of graffiti adorned these historical monuments.

VI - JUST DESERTS

After Persepolis we wasted no time in heading northwest to Mashhad. This meant passing through Yazd, a particularly uninspiring town, after a couple of days, and then continuing in the same direction for another thousand kilometres or so before reaching Iran's most holy city.

Apart from scratching my nose and belching a couple of times the journey to Yazd was unexciting. In fact, these two activities had the serendipitous effect of adjusting my adrenalin level in preparation for the town itself. Well, it was almost unexciting except for one occurrence. Along the way we pulled over, for no readily apparent reason to the side of the road. We were in the middle of nowhere.

The landscape was barren except for a truck which had come to a halt in front of us. As was the way of overlanders, when another vehicle full of backpackers pulled over, one was obliged to reciprocate and exchange pleasantries for an hour or so before the exigencies of time see one continuing to the next adventure or rendezvous.

Our next encounter was with a truck from the same company striking west while we were heading east. I wasn't feeling particularly sociable so I remained on the vehicle while members of both parties mingled. Then, much to my initial chagrin but soon delight, a woman climbed onto our truck and came up and sat beside me, introducing herself; Kristi was a nurse who had been working in one of Sydney's larger hospitals and was now taking a couple of years off to see the world. It turned out that we knew people in common and sat there talking for about ten minutes before we were on our respective ways. So that seemed to be that.

Well, two years later, when I could find no work in my field of psychology, I found myself working the night shift as a porter in the same hospital that Kristi had been working. It was an interesting time because I soon became friendly with many of the medical staff, doctors and nurses, who would sneak me in to watch operations and autopsies. I would often go out for coffee with them at the end of our late-night shifts.

One nurse, in particular, caught my eye. We must have been talking for quite a while when I had this feeling of déjà vu. We both realised at the same time that we'd had this conversation before when we had our brief encounter in Iran two years prior. By now I was single again so Kristi and I shared some nights together. It might have progressed had I realised I was not ready for another serious relationship so soon after breaking up with Jennie. So, not for the first time, we went our separate ways. Another time, another place. Kristi married one of the hospital doctors six months later. The way of all flesh.

Things didn't look up until we left Yazd - Yazd tends to have that effect on people. The route from that town to Meshed cuts through the middle of a desert. Actually, it's two deserts: The Salt Desert on the southern side of the road, and The Sand Desert on the northern side. Or is it the other way around, and who really cares? I mean, when the wind blows and fills your nostrils and camera and just about everything else, orifice or otherwise, with miniscule grains of sand, the last thing you care about is what desert it came from. After all, a desert is a desert - and the same goes for desert roses. Desert roses, if you must know, are a form of gypsum that, when sand particles become embedded in them, form rosette-like concretions. They are readily available in all the desert markets in this area as well as in the Sahara. But why buy them in a market when they're scattered everywhere?

We stopped for lunch on the first day just as the wind started. Usually the wind hits me soon after I've eaten but on this occasion the source was undeniably external. Everything that wasn't weighted down took off. Fortunately, the ground was rocky rather than sandy so visibility wasn't greatly affected.

Some fool suggested we get a frisbee out to see what would happen (it may have been me). Well, one throw showed us that even if one manages to project a light object a few metres into the teeth of a howling gale, when it finally hits the ground then it's likely to be in another postcode. It quickly outdistanced us and was last seen heading west towards the Red Sea with a stopover in the Persian Gulf. It was destined to be lost anyway.

This same frisbee, six months earlier, had travelled in my shoulder pack, to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. I had intended launching it from the summit to see just how far it would go. The trouble was, that by the time I'd reached close enough to the summit, I was showing and feeling the effects of altitude sickness so acutely, it was all I could do, with the assistance of two porters, to struggle down "that terrible descent" to the final hut. The frisbee never got a look in.

VII - SANCTUARY MUCH

After the first day's travel we stopped at a caravanserai lying in ruins as the desert and time encroached. In times gone by caravanserais served as sanctuaries for travellers at the end of their day also. Now all that was left were the crumbling walls that partitioned perhaps forty or fifty tiny enclosures.

There were twenty of us and we quickly fragmented into small groups to claim an open-air 'room' and enjoy a few moments of privacy. It was sunset as we were establishing our boudoirs and even though it was only late September the temperature was falling rapidly. It was going to be a chilly night.

Those who had been rostered for cooking busied themselves on the portable stove inside the truck, by far an inferior alternative to the open fires we usually employed - unfortunately we came across very little firewood during the day's travelling. We did, however, venture upon a disbanding truck tyre that was obviously beyond repair, a retread of a retread of a retread, almost *de rigueur* for trucks east of Eden.

After dinner the tyre was rolled against a wall, doused with diesel, and set alight. Fortunately there was no wind so the smoke billowed skyward in propitiation of Miasmus, the god of pollution. The heat that radiated from the

blaze was incredibly intense - those sitting ten metres away had to remove their sweaters. Our little conflagration also had the effect of bringing the group together in a spirit of bonhomie that had been absent since before Isfahan.

This, of course, made a welcome change to a group who were basically ill equipped to travel hard. Too often at least half of the group had expressed, or whinged, that they had expected, at the very worst rough hotel accommodation whenever possible. This was possible for less than two weeks of the three-month's journey. And it went without saying that along with camping for such a protracted period were the attendant 'horrors' of dirt and mud and rain and any other number of vicissitudes that might befall the traveller. Incidences of nastiness and bitchiness weren't uncommon and it was often necessary to distance oneself from the group when these episodes appeared imminent.

VIII - OPIUM OF THE FEW

At about nine o'clock a set of headlights approached bringing with them a car, an expensive 'city' car, unlike the type one would expect to find so far from a major town. It slowed down as it passed us before stopping altogether about a hundred metres further along the wall of the caravanserai. Two people got out and disappeared behind the car.

After about half an hour, three of us who were still inquisitive, wandered over. Two men, well dressed in western clothes, were sitting on some errant stones, which had once been part of the wall. They seemed unalarmed at our approach and that surprised me a little. They spoke reasonable English and referred to themselves as Persians rather than Iranians as if to disassociate themselves from the rumblings that would soon engulf the area.

In Sydney, over the years, whenever I've met people from Iran, they prefer the appellation of Persians. Another quick diversion dear reader - as alluded to above, I spent a couple of years working as a hospital porter. One of my roles was to train up some of the "porter" staff before they were deemed competent enough to work solo shifts.

One fellow in particular, Abi, was assigned to me. He was a well-groomed and softly spoken guy in his late twenties. He called himself Persian and when I informed him I'd travelled through Iran he became my "best buddy" hanging off me and my every word like a lap dog. That was until one night, around midnight when a woman, about to deliver, was brought in by an ambulance. In filling out her admission form I noticed she was a Jew from Egypt. "An interesting combination," I remarked to Ali. His response was: "If I had a gun, I'd shoot them

all.” After getting over my momentary shock, I mentioned that I came from a Jewish family; no admission that I’d ceased to be a believer, but I felt I had to say something, because if one says nothing, then stereotypes, most of which are negative, persist. I’d hoped we could have a conversation. The next day he was back with the other porters and actively ignored me, never once a hint of acknowledgment in our passing. A shame really. I’ve assumed the habit, in ensuing years, to ask people where their accent is from. I figure that, since I’ve travelled to over 150 countries, there’s a high probability that I’ve visited their place of origin. It usually establishes a ready rapport for whatever transaction, no matter how brief, is about to take place. Sometimes it doesn’t work.

I like seeing families of mixed race. I know they’re probably be up against it, but it reminds me of the lyrics of the song “Melting Pot” recorded by Blue Mink in 1969.

*What we need is a great big melting pot:
Big enough to take the world and all it's got
Keep it stirring for a hundred years or more
And turn out coffee-coloured people by the score
Problem solved. Well, you'd like to think.*

But then, my devil’s advocate, George D. Aiken, US senator, who died back in the 80s, lamented:

“If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone was the same race, creed, and colour, we would find some other cause for prejudice by noon.”

So back to reality. Back to the human condition.

Anyway, back again to the opium chaps. Although I’d never seen one being used, I readily recognised the opium pipe they were preparing. Obviously, they’d accurately surmised that we posed no threat when they’d passed us earlier. At least here they wouldn’t have to suffer Miss Muffet’s condition – Kurds in their way.

They motioned us to sit down and join them while they continued with their preparations. When they lit up, they passed the pipe to us as well. Not wishing to insult their hospitality we accepted. Hell, I’ll try anything at least once. I’d read and studied Coleridge and others as well as perusing many accounts of the opium trade in China around the turn of the century so I knew a little about the drug and its effects, but that was all theoretical and at best vicarious.

So let the dreams begin.

I had a couple of tokes before passing the pipe along. It wasn’t particularly smooth but then nowhere near as rough as the weed that was in the hookahs in Isfahan. At first, I felt absolutely nothing. The pipe was passed around again. Then suddenly, about ten minutes later, nothing happened. But it happened very suddenly, mind you.

In silence I studied the faces of my companions and they too seemed unaffected. And furthermore, the two Iranian guys seemed no different to my initial summation of them. Admittedly they were very laid-back but it was highly unlikely they would have indulged before they arrived. So after maybe another half hour or so we thanked them and headed back to camp. We noticed that our ‘hosts’ continued their activity.

I stumbled into my sleeping bag after Jennie removed any doubts as to her feelings about my wandering off and doing whatever I did. Anyway, I slept well and woke up early the next morning in my usual manner, untouched by the evening’s experience. The car had gone.

It strikes me now that it was highly improbable that, having smoked the pipe properly according to Hoyle (actually, that could read ‘Doyle’), we all remained unaffected. I wonder if, on seeing us approach, they substituted some tobacco or something hoping we’d sit there for a while and then leave. After all, when we did leave them, they seemed pretty compos, and one doesn’t drive to the middle of nowhere just to relax, does one now?

We had breakfast and loaded the truck and hit road through the desert. I noticed on the wall where the tyre had burned the night before, an ugly black stain, which covered a disturbingly large section of the wall. Apparently, a couple of the gang had tried to scrub it out and had made no impression. I guess it was another job for Mother Nature and Father Time. Anyway, it’s nice to know that along with other civilisations that have left their mark on this cultural crossroad, we too, had left ours.

The road across the desert was rough – rough enough to necessitate four-wheel drive. Often vehicles wouldn’t stick to what appeared to be the road at all and drove in the equally-as-smooth rocky sand alongside. At night trucks, all through this region drive with their lights out choosing instead to use the light of the moon, and even the stars on moonless nights, to show them the way. And in a strange way it did make sense.

A long way from city lights, the stars were always bright enough to facilitate this job and I could imagine that if one relied on headlights when travelling at the speeds they do, then one’s eyes would always be focused on only a small area. This uses the cones in the eyes instead of the rods which provide

greater peripheral vision which would often be called into use on these often-treacherous tracts. I could live with that.

The disconcerting thing was, however, that the only time they switch their lights on was when they see another vehicle approach, and then on high beam causing momentary blindness. The only thing to do is to aim the vehicle just to the right of the oncoming one and pray that it's, firstly, on the right side of the road, and secondly, that it's on the road at all. Needless to say, it was with no small relief that we passed through the desert without incident.

I must say, that the thing I remember most about the crossing is the town of Yazd, and not for any other reason than its name. I guess when one lives in a town as boring as Yazd, it's good to give it a name so that people can gather around on Saturday night and discuss it. It ranks right up there with a town I passed through in Tunisia which bears the name of Sfax! A lot of water has passed over the bridge since then. Strange comment? At first it may seem so, but when one considers that the bridges were aqueducts, then it does hold water.

IX - WHEY TO GO

It was significant that our last stop in Iran was Mashhad. Shiite pilgrims, for centuries, have visited Meshed to pay homage at the Shrine of Imam Reza. The place is full of tombs - whoever built this place had a grave undertaking. One can also visit the tombs of such luminaries as Ferdowsi and Khajeh Rabia, almost household names in Australia.

Nearby lies the tomb of someone I had heard of, Omar Khayyam. But truthfully, by the time we'd reached Mashhad, we were already 'mosqued-out' and 'tomed-out' so apart from exclamations such as "Oh look dear, another tomb," and "Do I have to take my shoes off again?", we were basically just happy to pay lip-service to the tourist imperative and then proceed with the mundane affairs of camp life.

It speaks volumes for my state of mind when the two episodes that remain most prominent in my mind are riding some kid's skateboard and nearly breaking my neck, and getting stung by a wasp on my toe which was more excruciating than anything I can remember. Oh, and we also ate some great yoghurt in a local store as well as taking some for dessert and desert.

There was no doubt that it was time to move along.

X - BORDERLINE

You know when you're approaching a border in the Middle East when you have trouble seeing the buildings for the trucks. Not that there are many buildings at borders. They are basically shacks with corrugated roofs. There was one building larger than the others but that's another storey.

I had an overriding desire to take a photograph but my desire not to spend the next twenty years in local detention must have been more overriding. The trucks themselves are a vision to behold. There are basically two main classes of these vehicles: the long-haul international ones which are mostly nondescript, and the local conveyances that look as if they've just popped out of a cartoon whose creator was tripping. The riot of colours makes the Wizard of Oz look positively monochromatic.

The only prerequisite to driving one of these contraptions is having a three-day beard, and for the men it's the same. Another notable characteristic of these trucks is that the wheels never seem to be aligned or maybe it's the chassis that's grossly contorted. Anyway, to see one of the more egregious examples of these approaching, one has the initial and distinct impression that it's coming at you almost sideways. This can be a little disconcerting especially to those who've only recently had a change of underwear which, in these parts, is by no means a regular occurrence.

Stories abound of travellers' experiences at border posts in the Middle-East. And until one has actually made a number of crossings most of the stories seem far-fetched. But border crossings are not places of this world. Anything can, and does happen. Most officials at these posts are, at best, semi-literate in their own language so when it comes to English, optimism is a fool's paradise.

We proceeded directly to the front of the queue by virtue of the fact that tourist vehicles can go straight through if long queues of TIR (international carriers) trucks exist. These carriers aren't in any hurry, they still get paid if they're sitting around, an activity in which they were well practised.

Our passage was actually only a minor irritation: we waited around an empty 'office' for an hour or so before an official collected all our passports and took them to a desk whereat four other officials suddenly materialised. While the head honcho inspected our documents, the others formed pairs and examined our passports as well. They do this by holding the booklet upside down and flicking through the pages until they come to the page that has the photograph on it. Then there ensues a moment of silence while they stare in bemusement at it.

A few seconds later one of them realises that something is amiss and then commences to turn the passport on its side and then, after another few seconds, into an upright position. What we, as travellers, found most and incredibly amusing was that they repeated the process with the next one and then the one after that. I've seen rats work their way through mazes in quicker time.

After the documents had been processed, two armed guards escorted us to the truck in order to search it for any contraband. The only notices, or warnings, of significance in English that we'd seen over the last month or so were the ones at the Turkish-Iranian border. These were in a small border museum devoted entirely to relics and stories garnered from failed attempts to transport drugs across that frontier. Disembowelled car doors stood alongside a multitude of implements used for concealing drugs. And invariably, on the wall over the exhibits, was an account, in quite reasonable English, of the apprehension and the fate of the transgressors. Even our laboratory rats wouldn't be caught second-guessing here.

One needed to be legally squeaky-clean passing through customs here or anywhere else in the Third World. These people are virtually laws unto themselves. They make arbitrary and, I imagine, even summary decisions and, right or wrong, they stick and it can be weeks or longer before the wheels of diplomatic bureaucracies can roll into action.

We laid out our belongings to facilitate their search and opened every compartment we had and even a few we didn't have (it pays to be seen to be helpful). They first inspected the exterior of the truck, tapping panels and smelling pipes and then, apparently satisfied, turned their attention to our personal baggage. They picked up a few items including a roll of toilet paper, which they looked at quizzically before signifying that all was okay, and we could be on our way. One of them actually waved goodbye to us sporting a wide toothy grin, while the other remained looking warily at us, one hand resting on the barrel of his weapon - we had no intention of making his day. The entire process took less than three hours which must be close to the record.

XI - HEREIN HERAT

And so into Afghanistan. Somehow this country conjured up so much more for me in my romantic mind than did Iran. Perhaps if I'd thought of Iran as Persia then the position may have been reversed. But clearly Iran wasn't Persia, or at least the Persia all my imaginings over the years had painted.

We headed for Herat, another seemingly inconsequential town these days, but boasting such antiquarian visitors as Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and Alexander the Great who, apart from a typographical error leading him to doubt his sexual orientation in his early years, became Alexander the Great who founded Herat, and probably should have departed with alacrity and anything else that was left lying around but then, you know what they say about founders keepers.

After spending a short time there it's no wonder that those historical glitterati decided not to settle down there and raise their families and provide a weekend taxi service for the neighbourhood kids so they could partake in the district stoning competitions.

We wandered around the streets and markets for the afternoon. I had a pair of leather boots made for me for a few dollars and replenished my supply of pistachios which had dwindled alarmingly. The boots, I might add, were beautifully handcrafted and I couldn't wait to wear them on my return to Sydney. By the time they reached Sydney, they were covered with a green patina suggesting that the curing process hadn't been completed. I sent them to a local bootmaker who did the job at twice the price I paid for the boots. I wore them once before I discovered they were too tight around the calves and induced cramps. So much for my seeking out a bargain. And that was it! Apart from those two momentous occasions, here as well, I have no more meaningful recollections of the place.

Travellers' Advice: don't visit.

XII - OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

We left the city in search of a camping spot which we found in the early evening. It was a treeless expanse with the odd boulder providing the only relief. And that's exactly where one might relieve themselves under the cover of darkness. Mick and John beckoned me over. Mick delved into his pocket and produced a block of hash about the size of a deck of playing cards. He'd swapped it in the market place for an old t-shirt or something.

I'd shared some rather pleasant sleepers with them on a couple of nights in Turkey and I guess they thought it was time to reciprocate. I didn't need to think twice. In fact, I didn't even need to think once. The last thing I wanted to do was to OFFEND them - I mean here we were, travelling companions and all that ... although I would never have dreamed of carrying dope myself mind you, I get a trifle paranoid that way. But I wasn't going to say no ... (where is a smiling teeth emoji when you need one?).

During the evening meal the three of us sat on some rocks just away from the rest of the group equivocating as to when we'd break into our bounty. As if there was any doubt! Before we'd eaten the last morsel, we'd broken some off and chewed it hoping to disguise the leathery taste with our food. I had a small piece, about the size of a thumbnail and a few times as thick while the lads each had about three times that amount.

The night was still young so we sat around chatting, gazing at the stars and whatever else was afoot, waiting for something to happen. Two hours past and we decided that whatever they thought they were getting, it couldn't be hash, so we retired for the night.

I found my way over to our tent. Jennie was still awake. Not that she said anything immediately - it's just that the atmosphere inside was pretty cold and the weather was mild. She asked me what I'd been up to - I can't understand why she was always so suspicious. I told her and was greeted by grunts of disgust and gusts of disgruntledness. That was an indication that she wasn't impressed.

Well, there was no point in discussing it so I hopped into my sleeping bag and fell asleep. It must have been about half-an-hour later when I woke to find that someone had re-pitched our tent on rather a steep slope. Ever since I'd removed all the pegs from someone's tent when we in Turkey, everyone had become fair game. But this was no ordinary slope. Gravity quickly asserted its influence and propelled me headlong into Jennie who consigned me back again with a few well-placed kicks.

I grabbed a tent strap and just hung on. The next thing I knew was that the tent had been picked up and was being bounced around. Those guys! Finally, it came to rest. I crawled to the opening, unzipped it, and peered out. The camp was just as I'd left it when I'd retired. Everything was still except for one of the tents; I think it may have been the boys' tent, about five metres away which had assumed a strange shape. I re-zipped our tent and grappled my way back into my sleeping bag in search of unconsciousness as the seas became rougher.

I woke at the usual time the next morning and mechanically went about my tasks. There was no way that, if I'd thought what I was doing, I'd get anything done at all. As I uttered my first phrase, I became rather confused - by the time I'd finished I wasn't sure whether I'd actually spoken or thought what I intended to say. So, I repeated it, concentrating on listening to my voice during the process.

But even so, once I'd completed each sentence, I still couldn't be sure if I'd uttered a single word. I must have been repeating myself because a sharp rebuke from Jennie put paid to this activity. But did she really say it or was it my imagination? This was insane. For the rest of the day I made no effort to

communicate with anyone. It would obviously have been fruitless anyway. The hallucinations of the last twelve hours were not ones I was in a hurry to repeat.

As for Mick and John, I really didn't become aware of them until the following day. By that stage I'd descended, or ascended, from wherever it was that I'd been and had decided that I wasn't losing my mind after all, although Jennie seemed to think it was still line ball. Apparently, they'd disturbed the others during the night, hallucinating and wrestling around in their tents.

They looked terrible - gaunt and haggard as though it was they who had been the first in the space movie to see the monster. Everyone had been looking askance, saying they'd been acting weirdly and been making no sense whatsoever. Fortunately, my reticence hadn't been associated with their behaviour so I was free of implication and of having to offer an explanation. Everyone had simply assumed I was in one of my more pensive moods.

These guys were sick. They spent the next two weeks prostrated in the back of the truck, off their food and their faces. It soon became apparent, given their predilection for self-abuse, and an astute observation from me, that they were paying for their hedonism so we weren't overly concerned.

Every time someone gave them some sustenance, they'd eat it and within minutes they would be seen rushing off to the nearest bush, whilst struggling to drop their pants, a mission, the success of which I would hesitate to gamble on. This diarrhoea lasted almost a month. During this time, I got into the habit of pinching their cameras every so often and take a picture of our campsite followed by another shot of a solid piece of animal or even human dropping just to help them remember the fun times we had together.

It was a shame I wasn't going to be around when they had the shots developed. Anyway, what could they do? Sue me for defecation of character? The poor guys lost so much weight and missed some really interesting experiences. I don't know what happened to the hash. I certainly made no further enquiries.

What was even sadder was that this episode, to a large extent, seriously diminished the number of interesting stories related around the campfire of one's experiences when nature called. It just wasn't going to be the same without Mick and John involved. Like when John had answered the call in Eastern Turkey and rather than take a shovel into the trees, he decided that the surrounding and abundant pinecones would make a suitable covering.

Whilst squatting and doing what a man's got to do, he began reaching around and picking up cones to cover his job. Unfortunately, someone else had had the same idea. So, although what he'd picked up was certainly the same

size, much the same colour and almost the same shape as a pinecone, it was no pinecone! No, it just wouldn't be the same without them around.

XIII - THE WESTERN APPROACH

Leaving Herat for Kabul we had basically two possible routes. The first entailed travelling south for a short distance and then striking east in a relatively straight run. The second, and our preferred path, meant heading northeast and skirting the Soviet border as far as Mazar-i-Sharif before turning south and on to the capital.

We'd heard rumours of the road having been blocked by mud- or rockslides so we inquired in Herat about the state of the road. At that stage we were informed that our truck would not be given permission to travel that route unless we were in a convoy and I'm still none the wiser as to why. Fortunately, another truckload of about twenty travellers came our way and agreed to accompany us.

So off our convoy crawled. The road was indeed the sufferer of nature's ravages. Often, we had to get out and watch the truck pass along ridges that were so narrow that, with one side scraping the cliff, the other looked straight into a ravine hundreds of metres below.

At times we would peer solicitously into these ravines searching for the remains of vehicles that hadn't been so lucky. And luck didn't always need to play its part - not the way some of these people flew over these roads or tracks, to be more accurate, defying any sort of logic at all. Once in a while another vehicle would approach from the opposite direction and if we were on one of these passes it would result in one, or in our case two, vehicles reversing to the closest place that would facilitate passing.

This process could take well over an hour. Nevertheless, the views were rarely short of breathtaking. It was a geologist's paradise. It certainly captivated me. Looking at the often, vertical fault lines in the surrounding cliffs had me pondering the mighty cataclysms that could have caused those massive upheavals millions of years ago. The more I thought about it, these disturbances could have occurred quite recently, not only in geological history, but within the times of human habitation; this area was prone to earthquakes.

We spent well over a week en route to Mazar-i-Sharif and the weather, despite the fact it was early October, grew noticeably colder by the day. We were travelling northeast and expected the weather to turn a little colder but we had no way of imagining just how bitter it would be.

It seemed that, if the wind wasn't blowing directly in our faces from the Pamirs across the Soviet border, then it was buffeting us from the east and the Hindu Kush. For many days we sat, huddled together, in the back of the truck, adorned with every article of clothing at our disposal, and then cocooned inside our sleeping bags, heads masked with balaclavas.

I've been out in the winter of Siberia in minus 40-degree temperature but the memory of Afghanistan (and a day, years earlier in Peru) remain etched in my memory. The chill permeated everything. Every morning we'd light a low fire under the truck to return the diesel to liquid. Of course, this fire had to be carefully monitored; I made sure I wasn't too close when this was happening.

Strangely enough, the nights weren't as bad. The wind seemed to abate and, what with the little heat there was from the cooking and the feeling, physically and psychologically, of a hot meal in our stomachs, life was more bearable. But I couldn't help but think of the locals here and, I guess, in a thousand other places, who had to endure these conditions over countless generations. So there's always someone worse off than oneself but I do wonder if the intellectual recognition of this makes it much easier.

XIV - BANKING ON THE SWISS

Our interaction with the locals here was reduced to the infrequent replenishing of supplies in impoverished market places and the excited waves of children through holes that constituted windows in houses as we passed through unmarked villages.

One night, however, we did experience a closer encounter. We had deployed ourselves at the side of the 'road' and had all turned in for the night, although, at times, I was so dirty from the day's activities, it may have been more appropriate if I'd been turned out for the night.

The night was quite still. I heard the sound of a motor, which meant that, since this was the only route, we would probably be having visitors. Eventually a truck coughed and spluttered its way into our midst. I peered out through our tent opening and watched a group of about ten locals get out and walk towards one of the trucks which was situated about twenty metres away. Jennie hadn't been disturbed and I couldn't tell whether anyone else was observing. It always amazed me how people could sleep through most disturbances. It was bloody criminal!

On the truck were two Swiss girls who had been assigned cooking duties for the night and, as it was common practice, didn't bother erecting their tent. I didn't know them well since they were with the other group. What I did know about one of them was that she was a giant of a girl and had been brought up in Kenya. She was also a terrible cook but when she said, "eat!" we all asked for seconds.

One of our visitors opened the flap of the truck and tried to get in. He didn't even manage to get a foothold before he came flying off the vehicle before assuming a rather undignified position on the turf. At this stage I reached for the mallet I used for knocking in the tent pegs and crouched near the opening of my tent.

I had no idea what I was going to do but I certainly felt better for reaching for it. Perhaps if they approached my tent, I could apply some anaesthetic to myself with the implement. Praise the Lord I didn't need it for, when another assault was countered in much the same manner as the first. Brunhilde (I've since referred to her only as such) issued forth from the truck brandishing two pans, swatting and screaming at everything in sight.

Well, the boys needed no further incentive to realise that there were better things to do, and boarded their truck, leaving us in an eerie dusty haze as revealed by all the lights as we lit them. People had materialised from their tents, all with mallets in hand, standing around in a state of excitement and some agitation. These locals could have done basically whatever they wanted and probably with impunity. Scary thoughts!

The next day passed, as had the previous one, continuing through some truly amazing scenery. Once again, I couldn't help but feel so insignificant in the knowledge of the forces that had moulded these landscapes.

We camped that night on very hard ground, the tent pegs meeting with strong resistance before gaining purchase. The evening meal was perhaps a little more subdued than that of the previous night. The vestiges of that night's encounter seemed, if not articulated, certainly to have created a presence. Not even the predictably poor quality of the meal provided cause for digression and this was a first.

Once again there were disruptions during the night. Fortunately, the sources were internal rather than of the ilk that we experienced the night before. That damned dehydrated food had struck again! There seemed to be constant activity throughout the night as people rushed from their tents seeking the privacy that the moment demanded.

I left the tent at least three times armed with a small shovel, a torch and a pocket full of "hot pink" toilet paper (this being the colour of the rations bought and distributed somewhere west of the East). What possessed our driver to buy pink toilet paper was completely beyond me; perhaps it was an economic decision. Since the ground was so hard, the best alternative to digging a hole was to place a rock on the deposit. I must add, at this point, that I have no desire to be perceived as possessing a scatological bent - it's just that, as I have remarked earlier, this kind of travel is replete with incidents about food and its alimentary metamorphosis, so no exception will be made here. In other words, after this episode there's more to come.

So, where were we?

Oh yes, as the night progressed the wind anatomical abated while through the valley there came a wind meteorological that had people rehammering their tent pegs in until daylight arrived revealing sight hitherto unwitnessed in this part of the world. It was as if the Mardi Gras had passed through! The ground was virtually carpeted with pink streamers for as far as the eye could see, confined only by the bend in the river and the valley walls.

Our driver ranted and raved about the pros and cons about waking up with toilet paper wrapped around his ears (he was often given to hyperbole), the thought of which would have stood in wonderful juxtaposition to his incessant frown. My recollection of the pros however remains somewhat elusive. I suspect now, years later, if he's managed not to suppress the incident, he'd have a quiet chuckle to himself. Given his dour and humourless nature, he's probably still working through a hit list. Anyway, his offsider, Dave, a Scot with a great sense of humour managed to placate him.

Four years later, I found myself stranded at a lonely bus station in northern Kenya. There was no one as far as the eye could see except for a woman who was likewise waiting for the same bus that would escort us part of the way to Nairobi. Well, we got into conversation and she revealed that she'd just left her boyfriend of three years in Nepal. I guess it goes without saying that the boyfriend was none other than our friend Dave. We planned to meet up in London in about ten months although I never followed through. By that time, my attentions were taken up by another.

Another day or so passed without any noteworthy incidents and we arrived in Mazar-i-Sharif which means "Shrine of Hazrat Ali" who was mythological hero who was assassinated near Baghdad in A.D.661. Legend has it that a camel wandered carrying his body until it reached this spot. Why on earth it was encumbered with his mythological body and then ended up here remains, to my

knowledge and comprehension, unexplained and a little more than apocryphal. Maybe it's a variation on 'walking a mile for a camel'. I suppose every settlement needs some claim to fame no matter how tenuous.

XV - A CASE OF FOOD CONTAMINATION BUT NOTHING TO GO ON

Mick and John were still lying supine in the back of the truck looking as though they were undergoing some sort of religious experience. The lomitol was working to some extent but the group had long since given up inquiring about their health, simply greeting them each day before moving along to other things prosaic.

They ate very little which fortunately spared them from the next gastric onslaught that our food had to offer. The food we'd been eating on the truck was either the canned variety or, as earlier mentioned, "dehyds".

I suspect any stomach ailments we'd experienced came from improperly prepared local produce which we'd soaked in chlorinated water and readied in other ways. Apparently, this wasn't always efficacious in decontaminating it. The next gastric visitation occurred just after our arrival in Mazar.

It was a synchronous event that struck, with little warning, about a dozen of us. My episode occurred as I was walking with three of our female contingent, in search of something interesting, an exercise which was to prove as fruitless as an orchard in winter.

We were simply strolling along when, I don't know who exclaimed "Oh oh!" first, but it was quickly chorused by the others. By this stage our sphincter control was Olympian but it was clear that a squatting place needed to be located post haste. In the centre of the town, bushes were hard to come by and even if one were to present itself, unless it provided extraordinary privacy.

The women, cognisant of the proprieties of the prevailing culture, would be better off taken in their strides. We quickly scanned the buildings and discovered a police station to which we made a beeline. After a series of pathetic charades, they understood our plight and escorted us to a sealed off section of their yard where four cubicles were situated side by side separated only by mud partitions less than waist/waist high. Such was our desperation and the state of our inhibitions that we quickly shucked the necessary clothing and attended our toilette, an occasion lasting probably ten minutes or so. And during that period, we squatted there chatting to one another as if in a coffee lounge! To this day I still find it incredulous that no one thought twice about it.

So that was Mazar-i-Sharif and brings to a close, matters scatological, for my journey east.

XVI - STATUES OF LIMITATIONS

We journeyed south to Bamiyan, a trip of just less than 600 kms through some amazing terrain including the Salang Pass which, at 3,353 metres, contains the world's highest tunnel. The Russians in fact, built this some years earlier. What were they planning?

It was still bloody cold. Even though we had travelled 600 kms from 'Mazar', we were still less than 300 kms from the Soviet border which is now the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan as the lammergeyer flies. The surrounding peaks were approaching 5000 metres although never likely to get there, not in my lifetime at least. The wind chill factor was in no way insignificant.

By the time we arrived in Bamiyan, after a couple of minor breakdowns, the sun had left the sky, not that it had afforded much heat anyway. We stopped by a campsite and, seeing it was deserted (no doubt because of the temperature), headed straight to a chai house which, after meals had been taken, doubled as a hostel. There were some other travellers there as well, a few guitars, and with a drop or two of some strange tasting local brew, the cockles of our hearts were duly warmed.

Rather than tables and chairs in these establishments, small platforms, which could seat five or six people, were scattered around. These were made of wood but with three or four carpets piled on top of one another, they were not uncomfortable. When one wandered into a chai house the sight that greeted the eyes through the smoke were groups of men sitting cross-legged on these platforms sharing a hookah and imbibing their chai. We never saw any women in these places.

When the locals had departed and the social activities had ceased, out came the sleeping bags and we arranged ourselves, four to each platform. There was no way we could have slept on the stone floor without succumbing to hypothermia.

Bamiyan is famous for its two Buddha statues. Famous, that is, within the confines of Afghanistan. As an exercise, I asked people when I returned to Australia, if they'd heard of Bamiyan. No one had. So unless you've actually been there or live nearby, the town isn't going to feature on or in travel documentaries.

Still, the larger of the two statues is mighty impressive. It's no great work of art - the head was badly damaged by Genghis Khan who took the term 'defacing' to new heights. Speaking of which, the figure stands fifty-two metres high and it's possible to climb and actually stand on the head by a series of caves gouged into the side of the rock face into which the statue is recessed.

The view over the valley was worth the climb. I seem to recall, years later, that an earthquake had damaged the statue. (N.B. These statues, wondrous as they were, were blown up by the rabble known as the Taliban as they began cutting their cultural swathe through the country in 2001).

Two other tasty features of Bamiyan are worth mentioning. The first is Shahr-i-Gholghola translates to City of Noise. This is really a citadel which was destroyed by Genghis (there he goes again! Boy, this guy had some testosterone problem!) and derives its name from the accompanying screams that signalled his vow that he would kill every living creature in the valley (charming fellow).

The second, and no less bloodcurdling morsel of interest is Karya Ajdahar (Valley of the Dragon) so named from the legend of the dragon whose appetite required a beautiful virgin for breakfast every day (don't we all) as a bribe to keep him from ravaging the countryside. In short, this was one smart dragon. Either that, or the local populace was one skewer short of a kebab.

XVII - NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT

We spent a couple of days in Bamiyan which was a nice thing to do. I like doing nice things.

The famous lakes known as Band-i-Amir lie within 100 kms or six hours drive from Bamiyan. Famous, that is, for their lapis waters and indeterminate depth.

Since we knew the site to be only 100 kms away, we decided to set out after lunch. It wasn't until later that we realised that we'd been kidding ourselves if we thought the roads were going to be any better than any we'd thus far encountered. That's where the six hours came into the reckoning. We arrived after sunset and it was snowing lightly so we zeroed in on the nearest chai house.

The owner of the chai house didn't appear until the next morning. His face was a mess. If he'd been in a fight and the other guy was in a worse condition than him, then the other guy was dead. He was not a pretty sight. Through a series of interpreting he told us not to wander to the lakes individually. It was dangerous.

The reason for his condition was that he'd housed a couple of English girls a week or so prior to our arrival and they'd gone off to visit the lakes. They never returned. Their bodies were found beside the lake by the local police constable who exacted some form of retribution on the chai house owner. He probably thought that it was in his best interests if there wasn't a repeat performance. We needed little convincing.

The lakes themselves are quite remarkable. There is virtually no foreshore. They are an amazing blue and if one doesn't mind the bitter cold, wading is impossible since the shore drops right away within a metre of the edge, so it's deep water or nothing. I chose nothing. But I took lots of shots and enjoyed the scenery.

XVIII - A CAPITAL ENDING

And so to Kabul (pronounced by locals as "cobble". This of course, confirms my theory that the senior citizens of the city were really a bunch of old Kabulers).

In 1977, as we arrived, it was plain to see that the infrastructure of the city was in disarray. The streets, the government offices and the transport system were in a sorry state when compared even to other Middle-Eastern towns and cities. And if we thought that was bad, then one can imagine what it was like less than two decades later after the Soviet invasion and an internecine civil war that took the country which was already on its knees to even greater depths of despair.

Our stay in Kabul lasted a couple of days. Long enough to replenish our supplies for the journey into Pakistan and India. And long enough to experience a few other delights of which we were sorely in need.

Food was cheap and there were a number of inexpensive restaurants which specialised in Western food. Mysteriously everyone passed up the opportunity to eat food from the truck. Small groups made their way into the eating area in search of what would cater to our gustatory cravings.

I found a menu, which included Cordon Bleu. I needed no urging. While it tasted more like cordon blah than the real McCoy, it was a darned sight better than anything that could be dredged up from the Bedford. Besides, my taste buds were lucky to be alive at all after some of the crap that had been served up to us over the last couple of months.

XIX - HORSING AROUND

Undoubtedly the most memorable and amazing experience in Kabul was a visit to the national stadium to witness a game of Buzkashi. This may well be Afghanistan's national game and hasn't changed much since the Mongols introduced it seven or eight centuries ago. The word 'Buzkashi' translates literally to mean 'dragging the goat' which, coincidentally should be the motto of the public service in the country, only the word 'goat' has been replaced with 'chain'. The game is played mainly in the winter months, probably as a way of providing internal heating, and the competition between the many districts that compete is both fierce and often bloody.

The aim of the game is to deposit an object in a scoring circle at one's opponent's end of the ground much as in rugby. There are some subtle differences however which only the trained eye may discern. The first is that rather than rely on one's own feet to cover the distance, horses are used. The second is that rather than carry a ball; a much larger object is used. This is either the carcass of a beheaded goat or calf that has been soaked and sewn together at the neck to stop, one presumes, the entrails spilling out and making the exercise look a little off.

There also seems to be an absence of a governing body with the result that the game really appears to the uninitiated, as simply a rabble of horsemen whipping each other and occasionally their horses into a frenzy in a brave attempt to prove that Darwin got it wrong in that apes really descended from humans. To the cognoscenti however, the game is seen as a confirmation of post-modernist social theories that unless women take over the world pretty damn soon, then the theories of the uninitiated about Darwin, are one hundred percent correct give or take a couple of percentage points.

Of course, none of this interferes with the spectacle. The game is usually played on an open field and the spectators usually find a vantage point on a hill or behind an irrigation ditch or a wall that prevents the horses careering into them which is not an uncommon occurrence for those who fail to heed the precautions.

We were lucky enough to be in Kabul to see the championship game which was played in the national stadium. It resembled a normal stadium in every respect except for a series of gigantic portraits of the then president. I have a feeling that these were dismantled two years later which coincided with his execution - his popularity had slipped alarmingly since our departure.

The cost of admission to the game was the equivalent of ten cents but as westerners we were forced to pay the exorbitant some of ten dollars in US currency. Some of our group were actually outraged enough to be dissuaded from attending. I bit the bullet and wasn't disappointed. We were given the red-carpet treatment literally - it was unfortunate that our shoes, filthy as they were, had dragged the mud in from the street, sullyng the magenta quite ruinously. In fact, dressed as we were, we really seemed out of place.

The occupants of our enclosure were either members of the military or those of the well-to-do. Not one of us was wearing anything that could be remotely classed as clean - although everyone in the campsite had spent the best part of the previous day laundering, these almost clean garments had not yet dried and it had been weeks since anyone had appeared looking as if they hadn't just spent the last couple of months crossing the Middle-East. The state of the layers beneath the outside ones was anyone's guess and, quite frankly, something upon which I wouldn't care to conjecture.

The steeds were indeed noble and beautifully groomed. Too bad that their postilions hadn't been as meticulous about themselves.

XX - END OF PASSAGE

After Kabul it was all down the Kyber.



AMERICA LATINA

FIVE

TIJUANA OR NOT? *(June 1975)*

I - SOUTH OF THE BORDER

The weather in New York was absolutely terrible. Praise the Lord I was in Mexico. It was a relief to see the other manifestation of the term 'Mexican Border' as opposed to the downstairs tenant to which the inhabitants of L.A. refer so disparagingly.

Michael and I were sitting on a local bus approaching the centre of town, that being Tijuana. Crossing the frontier had been a mere formality as far as customs were concerned. We did, however stare in some degree of disbelief at the almost stationary ribbon of traffic limping, heavy-laden back to the States, a mobile junkyard. This sight bore testament to the boast that Tijuana is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world - over 15 million visitors a year and as many as 150,000 on weekends in the summer months. Had Mancini unwittingly or suggestively been referring to Tijuana when he penned "Never on a Sunday"?

II - BUSINESS AS USUAL

Although we had no trouble locating the bus terminal in Tijuana, recognising it was not achieved with the same facility. The buses were predominantly two-tone in colour with rust being one of the hues, and if any remnant of tread

appeared on the tyres then, be it oversight or extravagance, I nonetheless suspected optimistically, that some degree of traction may be achieved. Equally as striking was the plethora of religious trinkets and paraphernalia that festooned the driver's cabin and its environs - a supplication to whichever deity had clocked on at the time - not, however, the symbols to invest this prospective passenger with any great confidence.

The inside of the bus terminal was predictable. The floor may have once been called vinyl, but now scarred with the imprints of cigarette butts and myriad other objects whose provenance I had no desire to explore, it was a handy receptacle for the litter and dirt tramped in from the street.

As we approached the ticket windows, we didn't need to enlist our keen powers of observation to realise we were not alone. The melee that surrounded the window was both raucous and malodorous in extremis. God! My nostrils were in danger of meltdown. Purchasing tickets out of this place was not going to be easy. I suspect the only queues in Latin America are those misspelt words found in billiard parlours. After about twenty minutes of frustration and about thirty seconds of Third-World survival tactics we emerged with our prizes and the knowledge that we had about six hours to kill before departure time.

So, faced with the option of permanently damaging our olfaction or braving the sidewalks, the latter smacked of paradise. Besides, I was feeling a trifle peckish, and although the food that one of the locals was peddling not far from the ticket window was probably edible, other considerations led me to follow the counsel of that renowned French gastronome Alf Resceau, and eat outside.

III - BUY, BUY LOVE

The streets were wide and the sidewalks narrow. There was an abundance of cheap and sleazy bars and every corner seemed to be punctuated with gaily caparisoned horses with carts selling those useless wares that tourists enthusiastically 'discover,' before taking home to adorn their attics, garages and storage rooms, not to mention white elephant stores - generally those items, you know the one I mean; plastic and glass kitsch, that within a short time of their purchase elicit the perplexed response: "What possessed me to buy this monstrosity?" Well, these are the little treasures which claim the versatility as a gift to an acquaintance or distant relative, and which ultimately, and somewhat circuitously, find their way back to their point of origin for the same reason - a well-travelled token that has been unwrapped more often than a courtesan's shoulders when the fleet's in port.

IV - THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

Trying to buy even a coke was next to impossible - just where impossible was completely beyond me since there was a conspicuous absence of street signs. We wandered past quite a few doors ignoring the crude, albeit amusing exhortations of the barkers until finally, besieged by stomach cramps (Pepsi withdrawal - dare I suggest Coke?), we let ourselves be lured inside by one of these characters whose poor command of English was only made to look proficient when you compared it to my command of his lingo. We couldn't understand him nor he, us, but you get the drift.

It was like walking into a cinema directly from bright daylight. I couldn't see a thing. Before my eyes became accustomed to the faint red glow, there was a girl on my arm (I'd have to get a good ointment at the nearest pharmacy). She didn't have to be a linguist for her English to outdistance her Spanish, and she proved it as she steered me, cramps given way to acquiescence, to a corner table. No sooner had we seated ourselves than a drink arrived for her. Amazing, I thought, how did they know what she wanted? Obviously, she had ordered before I came in and, seeing me groping blindly, had come to my assistance. What wonderfully hospitable people the Tijuans were.

Her drink looked like whisky in colour (or was it cold tea? I'd never know). In lieu of my still chimeric Coke I settled for a beer. Ice cold - what a pleasure! As much I would have liked to discuss Aristotelian metaphysics or Hegelian dialectic, I decided that this was neither the time nor the place and definitely not the person either. Nevertheless, my inquisitive urge got the better of me and before I could check myself, I was asking such probing questions as "Hi, how are you?", "What is your name?" and "What is your favourite television show?" (The reader may observe that I had become an accomplished conversationalist.)

She must have really taken to me because before long I felt a hand on my lap, and it wasn't mine (hand, that is. It was my lap all right). Her practised touch lingered briefly near my knee before dancing its way over the inside of my thigh. Maybe if she'd done it in English instead of Braille it might have been more effective, but given the meagre illumination in this crepuscular cavern, I couldn't read the subtitles. Private Partes was still recuperating from active service north of the border and without the threat of Corporal Punishment and Major Stryfe, he was certainly not in the mood for General Tom Phoolery. Even Marshall Artz held few terrors.

She remained undaunted and spent the next five minutes trying to stretch the point, but alack and alas, dear reader, for anyone of three or four reasons I

later rationalised, I just could not rise to the occasion. I mean, hell, all I wanted was a cold drink and out of the heat.

Having all but resigned herself to this sad state of affairs, she obviously decided to resort to the verbal approach although not dispensing entirely with her tactile manipulations.

“Sucky, fucky, ten dollars.” (She was not noted for her eloquence).

I, however, by this time, could have been noted for my circumspection. “No thank you, but thanks for the offer” - always polite. Well, it must have been something I said, for without another word, my belle-de-jour slid from her seat and disappeared into what must have been her office (did someone say orifice?).

Michael, apparently was going through the same hair-raising experience. Although his libido was usually in overdrive, he somehow managed to curb his wanton desires (for he was always wantin’). “No, not now,” he muttered. Were my ears deceiving me? - This could be the quote of the decade, and to think, I heard it first! His voice was an octave higher. And just how long the period he designated as “Now” encompassed, totally escaped me. Our time period, of course, tends to vary markedly according to the need. Notwithstanding, his immediate fate was no different to mine for his demimondaine also effected a hasty exit.

V - TIJUANA DANCE - UNDER THE REDLIGHT?

I must confess that I felt quite relieved that I was now free to finish my drink in peace. Fool that I was. Within seconds a new assault had been launched. So thus far in Tijuana, in the space of maybe an hour or so, my faculties of sight, smell and touch had undergone trials far beyond the call of duty. Now it was hearing’s turn.

A less than sophisticated sound system spewed and belched out a sad rendition of a popular western ditty. This cacophony heralded the floorshow. Actually, the only thing this floorshow had in common with a real floorshow was the floor itself. A steatopygous slattern, who, if she was approaching forty, it was from the far side, clad only in scant panties and a bra dating from her prepubescence, emerged from the back room and commenced gyrating almost in time to the music.

Her halcyon days had long since departed and one could only hope that her nights gave her something by way of compensation. She had undoubtedly

seen slimmer days too - it was fascinating to observe her mid-section as it moved independently of the rest of her body as she persevered in tripping her light fantastic. The dance rapidly degenerated into a series of obscene gestures directed at the exclusive audience which consisted entirely of Michael and me. How does one respond diplomatically to a Terpsichorean travesty? Before we had time to show our appreciation, she started chanting: “Cheeken, cheeken,” echoed the words as the grotesquely painted lips performed contortions of their own. A few more minutes transpired before she too went the way of the others leaving us at once, amused, bemused and ultimately saddened, by her and her comrade’s lot.

VI - AIN’T MISBEHAVIN’

Enough was enough, so we decided to leave in search of sanity which had long since departed. Come to think of it, I don’t think sanity had shown up in the first place. Requesting the bill, we were both presented with a tab for eight dollars, quite a sum to backpackers in 1975. Well, you could have knocked me over with a two-tonne petrified jalapeno if we weren’t expected to pay for the girls’ drinks as well. I couldn’t believe it - we’d been in Mexico for less than two hours and already we were being ripped off! We placed the two dollars for our beers on the table and motioned to leave when the waiter ejaculated in perfect English “Fourteen dollars short.” (This was the guy who had trouble understanding us twenty minutes earlier).

Talk about crash languages courses! This guy was wasting his time working in a bar. We explained gently, but firmly, to Senor Berlitz that since we’d neither ordered nor drunk the girls’ libations, then we should not be obliged to pay for them. I might add that arguing over a bill was nothing alien to Michael - he had been thrown out of better establishments than this one. We were experimenting with pushing naivety to a new level. (Two years later a friend recounted a tale whereby he and a friend were accosted with knives in a similar situation - I think he went on to mention that he left a generous tip).

As we were practising our diplomacy, another guy, whom we were informed, was the manager, approached. He couldn’t speak English at all and started screaming at us in Spanish. And since our Spanish vocabularies hadn’t been greatly augmented by this brief cultural respite, we replied in bewilderment thereby plunging the issue into even further confusion. Our bewilderment, embellished haphazardly with a “policia” here and there, along with an apocryphal reference to Senor Eduardo, seemed to have a palliating effect. We once again found ourselves on the streets, thirsts quenched along with our immediate lust for adventure.

VII - GET OUT OF TOWN

As nine o'clock languidly approached, the bus for Guaymas left - they never did get along. And this happened every night, what's more! The bus, having sheltered in a shed until just prior to departure time, was infinitely better accoutred than I had anticipated. A cursory inspection revealed four wheels, all seemingly the same size and strategically positioned at set points around the base of the vehicle. My confidence fairly leapt.

The driver displayed a more than expected sense of sartorial elegance, demonstrating pride in his job. The passengers painstakingly embarked and within half-an-hour had taken their seats (which the driver made them return immediately. Who can you trust these days?)

We clambered on last to escape the confusion only to find it occupying our seats in the form of two rather unlikely characters. The male member of this duo, for there was one representative of each gender, appeared to be either in the final throes of *tabes dorsalis* or one of those poor beggars who made the short list for the forthcoming box-office non-event *Life in the Times of the Bubonic Plague*. Such was the sad state reflected in his unfortunate countenance that his existence must have been as a pariah to virtually all except his inamorata who, in striking juxtaposition, was a flower of radiance. This flower must have outweighed her companion by at least his own weight. In fact, so bovine was she that, as she exuberated in her seat and almost half of that of her *compañero*, I had little difficulty in imagining her smiling down at me from a billboard poster extolling the virtues of the dairy industry.

For a full five minutes we stood there trying to convince this less than dynamic duo that they were in our seats but they refused to budge. (In retrospect I don't think they needed convincing as to whose seats they had usurped - of course they knew this. But they refused to budge).

Finally, in desperation, I enlisted the aid of the driver who, even if he wasn't conversant in English, quickly appreciated our plight. Focussing on them firstly his rear-vision mirror and then a pair of charcoal eyes which sheltered vigilantly under a solitary eyebrow that traversed uninterrupted, almost the entire length of his forehead, he shouted two words at them "Bajate!". Well, it sounded like two words, and away they went - off the bus. We took our seats and we were giving them back to no one.

So now we were ready to confirm that the only good thing out of Tijuana was the road south.

VIII - ON THE ROAD AGAIN

As the bus pulled out onto the highway the feeling of freedom once more engulfed me - being on the road, my only possessions in a small rucksack, twelve thousand miles and an eternity away from the dreams and fantasies I had shared with my loneliness and a few others over the last six months. The fantasy of the freedom of the road had given birth to the reality.

I opened the window and peered mindlessly out into the stillness of the countryside. The moon perched tumescent in the night sky touching the landscape with silver fingers, while the desert sentinels, the saguaro cacti, stood tall and somehow benign. Time ceased to exist in this world. Nothing barring man's destructiveness or one of nature's cataclysms could interfere with this. This is how it was and how it will be. I felt I was transcending time.

IX - TWO SLEEPY PEOPLE

I don't know how long I sat there, motionless, mesmerised, when we passed through a tiny hamlet, the sight of which jolted me back into the present. I once again became aware of my immediate surroundings. The passengers had ceased talking, and apart from one or two reading lights that were switched on, most of the bus's complement had gotten down to the serious business of sleeping.

Now sleep, when it favours me, requires silence, darkness, and stillness, none of which was southbound with us tonight. If I chance to doze off and someone looks at me, I wake. If my name is whispered or even thought, I instantaneously open my eyes. In short, slumber and I are often strange bedfellows. Being cognisant of this diminished capacity, I had taken the precaution before embarking on this journey, to always have on my person, a small reticule of mandrax tablets (mandies) for such gloomy occasions. They could, I figured, transport me into the reluctant arms of Hypnos within an hour or so and the buzz certainly wouldn't go astray either.

So, at about eleven o'clock and about ten hours out of Guaymas, we both dropped a mandy. Parenthetically, I must add that Michael was neither a light sleeper nor did he have trouble achieving that state. His stertorous grunts never left bystanders in doubt of his state of consciousness. He took his mandy simply because one of his life's aims was to redefine dissipation.

It can take anything from between fifteen minutes to an hour, depending on one's threshold to drugs and/or the fullness of the stomach before the

effects of most drugs are first felt. About twenty minutes on an almost empty stomach an observer would have noticed that both the quantity and quality of our dialogue had made a sudden nosedive. From that point on, any attempt at serious discourse proved utterly abortive. Shortly after, and with the rapidity of a notification from a bank when a payment is overdue, sleep descended upon us.

It was sometime later when I felt hands reaching into the tunnel of my slumber shaking me. They were persistent so with considerable effort I opened eyes. My God! Everything was black! My panic must have been a trifle disconcerting because I soon felt Michael's assuaging hand on my shoulder followed by his placating voice telling me it was one o'clock. Good I'll make a note of it! Did I need to know this?

X - A FOOL SUCH AS I

The bus had stopped and I could just make out a makeshift sign on a building outside. I slowly pieced the letters together - A-D-U-A-N-A - it meant nothing to me. I tried it backwards A-N-A-U-D-A - no better. But no worse. My pocket dictionary came to the rescue - ADUANA - CUSTOMS. Christ! That was all I needed. We stumbled off the bus with the rest of the troops, drongos en masse, our collective wits at one with the boulders - not a spark of intelligence alight between sixty of us.

The customs officers herded us all into a compound towards the closed door of a dilapidated shanty, with an excuse for a coke stand leaning against one of its walls. Being completely dehydrated, my skin beginning to resemble parchment, I made a beeline for the coke stand. Actually, it was more of a slalom.

"Un coca cola por favor," trying to sound Mexican. I'd no idea how much the kid asked for so in order to maintain the subterfuge of being a Mexicano (in my own mind, at least), I nonchalantly gave him what I considered to be a large enough note and he gave me my change.

Now, trying to convert pesos into dollars at any time can be difficult enough, but attempting this computation after less than one day in Mexico at one o'clock in the morning and being half demented (legacy of the mandy), can present some problems. By rather an astute calculation I figured I'd just paid over two dollars for a lousy bottle of coke which wasn't even cold. The fact that it was about to save my life was completely inconsequential.

I decided that I was either going to drop the Mexicano bit or play it cool and get ripped off. Screw it, I thought. I'm going to get caught often enough on

this trip, so no little turd is going to charge me over two bucks for a coke and get away with it. I pointed to the money in my hand and yelled "Mas! (more)".

The kid just shrugged his shoulders as if he didn't have a clue what I was talking about. (I'm not even sure that I was.) I demanded it again varying the pronunciation (I mean, how many ways can one pronounce a three-letter word?). He remained unmoved. This only resulted in my getting even more infuriated. "Policia" I countered, attempting a subtle departure from mas, hoping this time I'd hit upon a more efficacious formula. (So far this had been the most successful word of the trip. I even decided to Leave Mr. Ed in his stable). And, of course, if it was the right word, then where better to utter it than at a customs station?

A figure emerged from the crowd and in fluent English with only the slightest contamination of Spanish, offered assistance. I was still informing the little swine that he'd be hearing from my solicitors when it dawned upon me that this interloper was really speaking my language - gringo lingo. He, as well as the little gargoyles, must have really had me pegged for a cretin. After all, what sort of half-wit screams at a kid in the middle of the Mexican desert that he'll be hearing from his lawyers over two dollars? Still, in my state of mind this was of little concern to me. It was the principle that mattered.

Finally, after much gesticulating and fulminating, the kid handed over ten centavos, the equivalent of about two cents. The other guy just stared at me incredulously and melted, a little abashed on the kid's behalf, back into the crowd.

"How do you like them apples, you little bastard!" I snarled triumphantly as I stumbled away, onto my rucksack and then flat on my face giving my taste buds a very personal encounter with the gringo trail. By this stage my vision was becoming blurry - I wasn't hallucinating but some objects did seem a little Daliesque, shall we say.

My mind was fighting to stay on the periphery of sanity as I found myself wedged into the crowd once more and transported towards the baggage check. I say transported for although I was standing, I don't remember moving my feet.

As I reached the customs officer, he looked at the bags under my eyes, then at the bags on the table, grunted in disgust, chalked a white cross on my pack and told me in unequivocal English to piss off. I must have 'cause the next thing I remember was being on the bus again. This time sleep had no trouble finding me - I was the idiot in the third seat wondering why the publishers had decided to print an entire book upside down. As I headed in the direction of unconsciousness, the bus limped on towards tomorrow and Guaymas.

SIX

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT - IF ONLY THERE WAS A LOOSE SCREW. (July 1975)

I – SAN JOSE. BOY, DO WE KNOW THE WAY!

Five o'clock on a sultry afternoon and there we were, San Jose, Michael's legendary "Fuck Capital of the World". Michael and I were about six weeks into our Latin American sojourn which would last the best part of six months. Michael and I had met five years earlier when our then girlfriends got us together for lunch at their place. There was a guitar which was missing a couple of strings and Michael picked it up and commenced to play with amazing dexterity. We discovered we shared the same taste in music and humour and became close buddies getting into many interesting situations and predicaments over the years, many of which have, to our embarrassment and amusement, become part of the folklore we have foisted upon our mates.

It was around the end of '74 that I prevailed upon him to take some time off work and engage in some travelling. He was a lawyer who'd been working for the Crown Solicitor for a few years and was becoming bored.

I, after throwing in my legal studies and was just short of my honours year in psychology, decided that I, too would need another rest (that was how I completed my degree, by taking every second year off to travel). I became an

ambulance officer for six months before the two of us began our journey. In June we lobbied into and out of LA and into Mexico where we bought a couple of guitars before heading south and wreaking havoc through an unsuspecting Central and South America.

Anyway, for months now I'd been subjected to his panegyrics re the compromising reputation of Costa Rican, or more specifically, the women of San Jose. He had heard, and conveyed this salacious yet not unwelcome intelligence to me, that of all the Central American republics, this one stood as a leviathan over the others in terms of carnal resources; that if any other country had signified a drought to our libidos, then our advent in Costa Rica would open a virtual floodgate of wanton sex-crazed grisettes, let loose on poor little ol' us. So unrelenting had been his enthusiasm he even had me believing it.

But let us digress briefly to examine Michael's state of mind. When engaged in a little persiflage before we embarked on our journey, I happened to remark that we might be fortunate enough to catch a mestiza or two during our wanderings, a mestiza being a woman of Spanish and American-Indian descent. He failed to comprehend and, assuming the term to be a venereal disease, vowed religiously to take any prophylactic precautions deemed necessary.

This concern came as no surprise to me since thoughts of sampling the local fauna (which he spelt as 'forna') seemed an obsession with him. I mean, in all honesty, he could never admit to viewing the trip as one that would expand his cultural horizons. Having been privy to a number of anecdotes concerning sexual adventures in Latin America, he had determined to carry but two books in his luggage: "Learn to Love", and "Ways to Womanise". Had he bothered to scrutinise them to a greater degree than merely focusing his libidinous peepers on the titles and not laying an eye on them again until he was halfway through Mexico, he would have seen that they were simply volumes seven and nineteen of an understandably, lesser known encyclopaedia. (I made this part up).

I was actually part of the way through one of Wilhelm Reich's volumes on the human libido and Michael, well, I can't remember the title of his tome of which, during our entire trip, he would only read a chapter or so. Was it Proust's *Remembrance Of Things Past*? Michael's autobiography could have been more aptly title, oxymoronically, *Remembrance Of Things Pissed*. This little episode once and for all dispelled any notion I had entertained that the possession of a university degree implied also, the possession of higher order thinking.

Obviously then, our stay in San Jose would have to be one of abbreviation considering the sacrifice to which our bodies would be exposed. Morning and afternoon activities were cancelled forthwith in order that our, by that stage,

tortured flesh could recuperate from the rigours and ardours of the preceding nights and hence prepare for the predicted onslaught of the ensuing evening - once more unto the breach, so to speak.

I had to lie down, exhausted just contemplating it, and I wasn't even off the bus yet. Apparently, Michael was entertaining similar notions, although on a more visceral level. Beads of sweat were fast appearing across his forehead and his lips were beginning to twitch anew, always an ominous sign. Besieged by these ruminations we disembarked and galloped, packs and all, heedless neither, of pedestrian nor traffic, curiously fresh as daisies, after our sleepless overnight passage from Managua, towards central San Jose. We hadn't a moment to lose.

Our two inchoate Don Juans hadn't gone more than a block when a taxi pulled over and solicited "Hotel?" So that's the Spanish word for taxi, I pondered.

"Donde?" Michael asked, always suspicious and alert for rip-offs.

"About one mile down the road, in the centre of town." (The classic reply). English yet! (but read with a Spanish accent).

"How much?"

"Four dollar for a night. Eet belong to my brother." (pronounced brorthere - now you're getting the idea).

"How much in the taxi?" I asked, making sure all questions had been covered before accepting.

"Maybe worn dollar" he replied with a smile that exposed a set of teeth that looked more like a row of faded and erratic tombstones in a long-unattended cemetery. I searched my pockets and produced a tattered dollar bill - just to be on the safe side. The fare came to the equivalent of ninety cents but I gave him the dollar anyway as a reward for his honesty. Miserable bastards, he probably thought to himself as he escorted us into the lobby. Be honest with them and all I get is a lousy ten cents. I could have bitten these turkeys for twice the price!

The hotel lobby was as mean and uninviting as a brothel in Salt Lake City on Christmas Day. One of the dust-laden neon lights flickered annoyingly as we approached the desk, a piece of furniture littered with papers giving the impression of chaos rather than industry. We asked for a room with two beds for about four or five nights (and make them sturdy, I mused - okay, I confess, I was caught hook, line and sinker with Michael's enthusiasm.)

Our tariff, we were informed, was five dollars a night, a little increase on the bait dangled by our taxi driver. We figured that since they were brothers,

the driver ought to be well aware of the current prices. The hotel manager was simply trying to catch us for a bit extra to line both their pockets. The average, run-of-the-mill, common garden variety type tourist would have felt held over a barrel - pay the five dollars or go elsewhere therefore incurring further costs for transport.

But our stint in Mexico had prepared us, gloriously, for just this sort of situation. We had become rip-off busters, a kind of travelling mini-consumer affairs bureau. Michael took charge and within two minutes had the price down to \$4.50; sounded fine to me, but not Michael. For him this was a test case - a precedent had to be established. So, grim-faced and full of determination, he thrust himself back into the thick of things by refusing to accept anything short of the original four dollars. I remained in the wings a benign smile gracing my countenance, a paragon of neutrality lest I should be required to act as mediator. I was also within two steps of the door in case things turned nasty.

My services, fortunately, were not needed, since Michael contended that if they were indeed brothers as they claimed, then both should be aware of the price, in which case either someone was lying or the hotel manager had made a mistake (I was now one step from the door). Michael had called their bluff. He had a way of making people feel they had been caught with a poker hand of five aces. We got the room.

Appealing to the honesty of the likes of taxi drivers and hotel managers in these regions can be a potentially hazardous proposition. I guess the trick is to convince them, ab initio, that they actually possess integrity and, having achieved that, question it ... carefully, the Latin temperament, on occasions, can be a little volatile.

We paid our tariff, cash, in advance - hard currency having a more placating effect than travellers' cheques, and set off in the wake of the manager to our room. But beneath the perspiring brow there was a peculiar gleam in his eye (I think it was the left one) - he hadn't finished with us yet. Just one more round. Was something afoot? (I cast a glance at his extremities - shoes, just as I suspected!) Never underestimate your opponent. What new lesson were we about to learn? It presented itself in two parts. The first became apparent within seconds as we climbed, laden with our baggage, up six flights of stairs barely keeping pace with our increasingly sprightly guide. The lift, he informed us, was not working.

At last we arrived at the door of what, for the next five days, was to be our living quarters. Actually, since there were only two of us, we referred to them henceforth, as living halves. I was breathing heavily and could feel rivulets of sweat

streaming down my back. Michael was in a complete lather, his sweat-soaked t-shirt clinging to his skin, while the manager, surprisingly enough, appeared worst of all. He was slumped exhausted, as if in an apoplectic stupor, against the wall as if against the ropes in the final bout of a boxing match. OK, gloves off, it's enough now, we'd both made our points. Still, it must have been compensation enough for him to see us suffering as we did. And as a consequence, my suffering and chagrin were greatly alleviated as I observed his pitiful condition.

The room was extremely basic. I mused over whether he was joking when he said we'd have to make our own beds – would they provide us with wood, hammer and nails?

It was now six o'clock. We'd eat at nine. For the next two and a half hours sleep was our sole consideration.

II- DID THE EARTH MOVE FOR YOU?

I noticed the first tremor at about eight o'clock. It had grown dark and I'd been awake for about ten minutes, contemplating the vicissitudes of the trip, the way one might do when alone in the darkness (at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it). Suddenly I felt a sort of vibration coupled with a gentle rumbling. It lasted perhaps two or three seconds, long enough to compel me to switch on the light and look quizzically at Michael (his gastrointestinal record was not a glowing one.)

I was tempted to ask whether the earth moved for him also but the gravity of the situation forced me to do otherwise. He'd noticed it too – enough to stir him out of his slumber if not his torpor. We agreed, with an air of hope, that it could have been anything – thunder, a heavy truck passing. There may have even been an underground railway in this city, we just didn't know and no answer was forthcoming.

About a quarter of an hour later the rumbling commenced anew. This time it didn't stop as before but grew in intensity until the entire room started shaking. Something fell off my bedside table and shattered. My eyes darted across to Michael who was lying horror-stricken on his bed mumbling everything from Hail Marys to Polynesian volcano supplications – he was taking no chances. Then just as suddenly everything was still.

“Christ, my whole life flashed before me!” he exclaimed.

“Please. You should be ashamed of yourself” I remonstrated. “I hope it was censored. This is a family hotel, you realise.”

By this time my eyes had returned to me and I raced into the corridor to the nearest window. All below was peaceful as if nothing had happened. People were making their way out for the evening or just strolling along the sidewalks, while cars proceeded in as orderly a fashion as was possible in San Jose, to their destinations. Strange, I thought, I couldn't have imagined it. Nor Michael.

By now he had decided that crawling under the bed was a physical impossibility and so his visage made a cursory foray into the corridor preceded by a not-so-white handkerchief he had rigged to the bristly end of his toothbrush. It wasn't that the bed was close to the ground that precluded Michael from getting under it. It was more related to the fact that he had only just started losing weight. In fact, it wasn't as if he were even overweight – it's just that he was very short. You see, if one reads the medical graphs and charts, it is easily discerned that for someone of Michael's weight he should stand approximately twenty-five feet tall and Michael's six-foot plus frame was clearly short of this.

Perhaps the biggest boon to his weight loss in Latin America was the result of a function he attended the afternoon he flew out of Sydney. Unbeknown to him, half of the guests contracted food poisoning. Within two days of arriving in Los Angeles he, too was suffering a mild case of diarrhoea. We'd assumed that his affliction was the result of the third taco he'd despatched soon after our arrival. This sorry state continued in varying degrees, almost unabated, for almost six weeks (shares in knickers companies fairly soared). The result was that by the time we arrived in Peru he'd lost about twenty pounds. This also led to some minor problems regarding laundry.

Most often we'd simply wash our own clothes in the sink of our hotel room and occasionally splurge and actually use a laundromat. But given the impact of his affliction and the resultant state of his underwear, not even Michael wanted to lay his hands on them. He was even reluctant to leave them in the hotel rooms after we'd vacated them through feelings of retrospective embarrassment. And for Michael to be embarrassed, things had to be pretty ugly. He resorted, on a couple of occasions, to delicately manoeuvring the offending articles into paper bags and, during an overnight bus journey, projected them into the desert, safe in the knowledge that he'd escaped detection. He also ensured that whatever wildlife inhabited the area, be it flora or fauna, would immediately be consigned to the endangered species list.

These episodes did prevail upon me to wax poetic. A limerick, I surmised, was in order.

When Mick had a bout of things gastric
He resorted to measures quite drastic.
Having discovered the potions
Had no effect on his motions,
He's now wearing knickers of plastic.

Somehow, he didn't appreciate my attempt at levity. He remained both moved and unmoved at the same time.

I returned to the room to find the shattered remains of my duty-free aftershave bottle and its contents adorning the rug beside my bed. Of all the things that could have broken this was the only casualty, and I didn't even get to use the lousy stuff more than a couple of times. Look on the bright side, I told myself. At least it will neutralise the effect that Michael's shoes were having on my olfaction.

We dressed hurriedly and descended the six flights of stairs passing the ascending lift on the second. I couldn't be sure but I'd be willing to lay odds that there was a smug smile on the manager's face as our eyes met fleetingly. "Hijo de la puta" (son of a whore) I muttered as I continued down.

The desk clerk was sitting, relaxed against the counter reading a comic - everyone seems to read comics in Central America. I don't ever remember seeing someone reading a book, even on long haul bus trips. Soap opera comic books were everywhere. Naturally the clerk couldn't speak English so our impending questions were unnecessary and we were left to speculate.

NEWSFLASH

Earthquake destroys San Jose, capital city of Costa Rica. Two Australians are missing, presumed drunk, following a series of tremors, the strongest measuring 7.4 on the Richter Scale. The epicentre of the quake was located in the heart of the city under the Hotel Boston. No effort is being exercised to rescue them.

One concerned mother, who shall remain nameless, is now on her way to the quake ravaged city in a specially chartered jumbo with a handpicked search party of Jewish mothers who can reputedly detect chopped-liver and latkes at a distance of three hundred paces. "Noo" one of them replied to reporters, "I should sit here and plutz?" Further news as it comes to hand.

After some ten-minute's interrogation of bemused bystanders proved fruitless, we were reluctantly arriving at the conclusion that nothing happened. Then it hit me - there was but one explanation. No, it couldn't be, I ruminated, he's never had it that bad. After all, he went just before taking a nap and he's still wearing the same knickers, what's more. Although, if I could have put into words the look of horror he had on his face at the onset of the tremors, it would probably read something like "Ahhh! It's finally happened. Relief at last!" - I made him produce a relatively clean pair of knickers (for Michael) before I was finally convinced of his innocence.

It was now eight-thirty and I was becoming aware of different rumblings. My stomach was reminding me that it was time to look after the inner man. We decided to eat "ethnic" but the sight of a Chinese restaurant across the road from the hotel was too seductive to ignore. Anyway, proper "ethnic" may well have resulted in us eating Australian, say, a pie floater, neutralised by tomato sauce. Chinese restaurants look the same the world over. Once inside we could have been anywhere with the possible exception of China. The only differences between this one and those with which we were familiar in Australia were the subtitles and the size of the dishes.

"Waiter?" I ejaculated. "Is this soya sauce on the menu?"

"Lo siento (I'm sorry)," he replied as he removed the unsightly brown blotch from the carte.

We didn't realise it but the portions would be almost twice the size we expected so instead of being served with enough food for Michael and at least one other, we were about to receive a meal that would sustain a small function and I'm not referring to a bodily one.

"Never mind, my good man. We'll take these dishes," and I proceeded to contemplate our carte anew.

"Would you like chopsticks or prefer knives and forks, senor?" he enquired in perfect English. I wondered if he knew about the earthquake but thought better of it.

When I cast my eyes in the direction of my travelling companion sitting opposite me, he was already peering lecherously into the menu, a fine film of saliva gathering ominously in the corners of his mouth. Further contemplation was unnecessary. Survival was the order of the day.

"Just bring out the eatin' irons pardner."

There was going to be no room for manners - a good old-fashioned free-for-all, a grande bouffe perpetrated by two Australians in a Chinese restaurant in Costa Rica. It didn't take long for the plates to arrive. When I saw them, I nearly fell backwards off my chair. They were enormous and it was imperative that they be dispatched in their entirety.

When you're on the road and watching your money, nothing is wasted. No morsel is neglected. No plate returns to the kitchen unwiped by the very last piece of bread, which is usually free anyway. It's an unspoken dictum. Any thoughts of seeing who could eat the most the quickest were immediately dispelled. Seeing who could devour the most with shared meals had become a grim ritual, often at the expense of deprecating the cuisine. Had we not shared our fare, we certainly would have saved both money and our waistlines. But isn't that often the case back home? The tendency to over-order and over-eat can be observed in any restaurant, anywhere, as long as the bill is being shared.

We commenced in a soberly fashion aware of the gargantuan task that lay ahead. Two hours later, to mutual exhortations of encouragement, the last scraps of food were forced the way of their companions to prepare themselves for that faecal metamorphosis which would beckon Michael from his bed on no less than four occasions that night. Although I didn't entirely escape the penalty, my experience was one of lesser degree.

We settled our account and, with our knees buckling and our belts failing to, we stepped out into the night air for our evening constitutional. Half way around the block we came upon a cinema, the back wall of which was contiguous to our hotel. That's rather handy, I thought. We can always take in a movie if, in the almost uncontentable event, that the action around town was slow. Wonder what's on. Wonder indeed!

"TERREMOTO" the sign read. Starring Charlton Heston and Ava Gardner inter alia. It looked interesting enough.

"Terremoto", "Terremoto", I kept thinking. The word was familiar. It was coming back to me. Sure, when I'd studied Italian a couple of years before, the word had popped up regularly in one of the short stories I'd read. Then it came to me - "EARTHQUAKE". Spanish and Italian, Romance languages. I informed Michael and we agreed to place it on our itinerary. We hadn't proceeded more than a few steps when the penny dropped. Our heads turned simultaneously and our eyes met. "Earthquake!" we cried doubling up into a paroxysm of laughter. That's what was happening as we were lying in bed. And that little slime bucket of a manager, he knew it all along.

We must have teetered there laughing uncontrollably for about five minutes before I had to sit on the curb. I had been laughing so much that I was completely out of breath and feeling decidedly weak in the knees. We finally regained our composure and returned to the hotel, perfunctorily rechristened 'The Hotel San Andreas' although through no fault of its own. For the remainder of the stay we made sure that all breakables were secured, safe from the ravages of the 8.00 p.m., 9.30 p.m., 10.30 p.m. and 11.45 p.m. earthquakes which were more punctual than a rent collector in a recession. And in fucking Sensurround, to boot!

And so to bed.

"God, I really feel like a fool," Michael mumbled as he lay there, quite unable to move after culinary exercise.

"Be serious," I reminded him. "Where are you going to find one at this time of the night? Go to sleep."

III - DESPERADOS

Things were desperate, a situation with which we were not totally unfamiliar. Three days in the "Fuck Capital of the World" (Lord knows where he got that epithet from), and not even a look in. Michael's eyesight was deteriorating rapidly and his gloves were wearing thin, not to mention that he had been in a priapic state now for about twenty-four hours - a deformed human tripod no less.

On the second night we presented ourselves at two wine bars. The first was an English-style affair with everything from Guinness to darts, but no women. Strike one! We chose the Guinness and that probably would have taken care of the night had not a fellow drinker and desperado alluded to another pub nearby that might cater more adequately to our needs (did he know Michael that well?).

Although ostensibly it resembled any other bar, it turned out to be a front for a cheap brothel. This place had seen more pricks than the second-hand dart board in the previous joint. Having surveyed the wares and agreeing that the quality seemed more than a little herpetic, we were rapidly becoming convinced that the reputation of the town was somewhat overrated - a hit and myth affair.

"Well," Michael sighed, "we may well have to get used the idea of having wet dreams."

“Maybe it’s just as well,” I reflected, casting my eyes in the direction of the woeful strumpets on offer. “At least you’ll be meeting a better class of woman.”

I too had been feeling the effects of the licentious veneer through which we’d perceived the place. Short of being afflicted by Priapus, I had been roaming the streets since our arrival in a half-cocked manner, on the prowl and ready to pounce on the first available (and attractive) female to show herself. I was walking around with what felt like a rubber truncheon in my jeans - (“Is that a torch in your pocket...?”)

The following night we heard of a dance about three blocks from the hotel. It sounded promising - I mean what wouldn’t? Let me point out that we never at any time expected to have the need to attend a dance or any other organised social event. That level of desperation was never contemplated. We had anticipated being constantly surrounded by ladies from the moment we sallied forth onto the streets - to be initially, the passive partners to frenzied encounters of the first and second kinds. It speaks wonders for the resilience of the male spirit that, given our experiences thus far, we were still so sanguine about our prospects.

But hope springs eternal, as they say, whoever they are, and may it be said that they, increasingly, have a lot to answer for. In short, the dance put an end to that. It was about as exciting as a convention of accountants in a public library. Hope had crouched, ready to spring, but at the last moment stumbled and fallen flat on its face. The attendance must have been in the vicinity of twenty or so, each and every one a desperado. We blended in magnificently, so much so that we departed completely unnoticed (and when finally, we did leave, we went completely unnoticed). Not that we greatly cared, mind you.

The calibre of prospective dancing partners wasn’t worth mentioning. In fact, since that’s the way I feel about it, I won’t mention it further. The music consisted primarily of a record player which was submitted to a collection of either warped or antediluvian albums that somehow managed to find themselves in the same room. Yes, even the discs were desperados. I must confess, though, had Michael asked me nicely, I may have consented to a quick *Pride of Erin*.

IV - PARADISE FOUND

The evening of the fourth day found us sitting dejectedly in our room wondering how we were going to acquire some, by now, elusive female company. Yes, it had come to that - we would be happy with merely company - how

the mighty are fallen. We were now frequently found in recumbent attitudes concocting strategies for the hunt.

“Fuck Capital of the World, my arse” I ranted, feeling certain that the “ed” had been omitted from the first word. “Just who told you that rubbish anyway?”

“Well,” he demurred, (that always signalled a load of crap was to follow - not difficult in his condition) “it was a friend of a guy who’d been here four years ago.” The old ‘friend of a friend’ story and we’d fallen for it. But knowing this, was no consolation. My hormones were stalking around my body like caged lions looking to make a break, while Michael was beginning to break out in carbuncles.

“We’re here for two more days and as much as I enjoy sightseeing with you, there are a few sights I’d like to take in by myself, anatomically speaking, if you get my drift.” I for one did not intend leaving this place inviolate or without first exploring all possible avenues.

Michael remained slumped on the adjoining bed with an imbecilic expression stamped on his face (my powers of discernment had to be on their toes to distinguish this look from the normal one). Christ, I thought. Not only is he going blind, but it’s also affecting his mind.

“Now we’ve got to look at this calmly and rationally,” I remonstrated as I observed his pitiful countenance (I was always ambitious). San Jose has a population of over 200,000, right?”

“If you say so.”

“Therefore, there are approximately 100,000 females, okay?”

“Right” he contributed brightening up a little. I could see this wasn’t going to be the effort of a brains trust.

“So, given a normal age distribution one could assume that there would be in the area of 10,000 available women between the ages of, say, eighteen to thirty-five.”

“Shit! That’s 5,000 each!” he exclaimed as he removed his shoes. “We won’t be here that long.” (It would just seem that way).

Was he trying to be funny? I wondered as I consigned his shoes to the far corner of the room. I just couldn’t be sure any more. I needed a sense of humour just to take this guy seriously.

“That’s right genius,” (positive reinforcement always worked wonders with him). Now all we have to do is find them since they obviously can’t find us.

So, the way I see it is that there are two factors to overcome in order to give ourselves the best chances. First, Catholicism is rife in this place so we've got to find a place where women are more liberal in their attitude to sex and, I guess, everything in general. Second, since we're dealing with locals, we'd better put some polish onto our Spanish or find some chicanas who speak English."

"The only place that a large number of people would speak some sort of English here," Michael posited, "would be either at school or university. God, that's it!" A second penny dropped (actually it was a bent centavo but more importantly, it was the second time in as many days - we could be rich! I should live that long!). "Why don't we pay a visit to the university and sit in on an English class? It could be just the break we're looking for." Spoken like a true desperado.

It seemed like a brilliant idea.

First thing in the morning we could set out for the university. 'First thing in the morning' can mean two things: bright and early, soon after daybreak or, depending upon our time of awakening, the initial activity. In this case it referred heavily to the latter. And since we didn't greet the day until about eleven, it was almost first thing in the afternoon, but let's not quibble. Having worked out the direction from our handy tourist map and discovering which bus to take, we set off in search of excitement, debauchery, and the unknown although not necessarily in that order.

V - SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS

The day became one of fluctuating fortunes. We found the uni without much trouble. The campus was surprisingly large, not unlike big universities in much larger cities - functional, but in so being, sacrificing much of its character. 'Enquiries' was easy to find, and there did exist a faculty of English - 'Facultad de Ingles' or something like that. It was a typical campus - left-wing posters plastered seemingly everywhere, a marvellous diversity of apparel, and a veritable abundance of attractive women - *Hola El Dorado!*

Michael stopped a passing girl (the only other time he did that was when he had wandered into the ladies' toilet by mistake. That was in Frankfurt a few years earlier when he thought DAMEN referred to the less fair sex).

"Por favor," he began. "Habla Ingles?" (using the familiar conjugation.)

"Yes, I speak English. May I help you?" It was apparent from the few words that Michael had uttered that Spanish wasn't his native language. We were

delirious. This was fantastic. Everything was unfolding beautifully. She told us how to get to the English classes and then sauntered off to her own class. Also, she was busy that night - no harm in trying.

We wandered into the language faculty building, a sterile place with highly waxed floors, white-washed walls and large squares of neon lights protruding from the ceiling every few metres. The cold corridors greeted us with the clinical detachment of a hospital.

We lingered and listened outside a couple of classrooms in order to ascertain the value of going in. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to tell just what was going on behind the closed doors short of opening them and, making a split-second decision, either continue to a seat or proceed to the next room. So, we decided to take a chance. Outside the first door we could just make out the faint echoes of English as they reverberated around the room, so we decided upon our initial foray.

Michael quickly turned the handle and pushed against the door ready to poke his nose around the corner. It's a very interesting thing about doors in Australia and elsewhere - in Australia doors to classrooms open inwards. The ensuing explosion or implosion as Michael's nose, followed unmistakably by the rest of his body, found something that resisted his progress, was, shall we say, both memorable and clamorous. Perhaps another room would seem more propitious.

The sound issuing forth from the next room also appeared encouraging. We opened the door quietly, not too quietly, and peered in. We liked what we saw. There were about twenty students, predominantly of the female variety (my favourite gender), seated behind their desk-chairs which formed a semi-circle around the blackboard and the tutor who stood in front of it.

He was probably in his late twenties or thirties, conservatively dressed in neatly tailored slacks and pullover and revealed his ruggedly handsome features as he turned to the source of the disruption. We smiled and were aware of his eyes which followed us as we brazenly walked over to two unoccupied chairs as if it were the most natural thing to do - just two regular students (What were we thinking!)

By the time we had assumed our seats, all conversation had come to an abrupt halt and all eyes were focused in our direction. The tutor marched straight over to us and uttered something in Spanish. Here we go, I thought. Since neither of us understood what he was saying I decided to come clean in order to avert the web of deception we were fast weaving. I explained to him, disarmingly, that we were from Australia and since we were visiting the

university, we begged his indulgence and hoped he'd let us remain and maybe even take part in the lesson.

I carefully avoided any reference to the fact that Michael's gonads were now in overdrive. His eyes lit up as he told us in his thick Spanish accent that we were more than welcome to stay. He asked our names and then presumably explained to the class what was happening. This elicited murmurs and giggles for the ensuing few seconds.

For the next forty-five minutes we became an integral part of the lesson, so much so, that our time for sizing up the social possibilities was somewhat diminished. We were being subjected to an inordinate barrage of penetrating questions such as "What is your name?" and "How old are you?" no less, to which we were obliged to answer in Spanish. From the linguistic viewpoint the exercise proved most beneficial. And so the questions continued - it was a renewed Spanish Inquisition! We had to keep on our toes ready for the next one (besides the desks were higher than the ones back home).

I, once and for all, cast aside any doubt about my lingual dexterity when asked my favourite television show when I answered in flawless Spanish "Senor Eduardo" - and so set any perception that Australia might indeed possess culture, back another ten years. After all, how does one say "Get Smart" or "Bugs Bunny" in Spanish? After that little rejoinder there was little or no point in any further effort to display our intelligence, collective or otherwise.

The bell rang saving us from further embarrassment. By this time, we had managed more than a cursory glimpse of the ladies and figured there were at least half a dozen possibilities. The pay-off was nigh. We were about to pursue them into the corridor when the tutor intercepted us and asked us our impressions of the lesson. We gave him a favourable response telling him we thoroughly enjoyed it (meanwhile the girls were escaping). He then commenced to tell us how he had learnt English in the U.S. as well as a few other irrelevant details of his life.

How could he mistake us for someone who was interested? The sad fact was that neither of us was particularly interested at this critical time (the noise in the corridor was fading along with our hopes). He continued to assail us with his monologue and then invited us to the cafeteria for a coffee and a continuation of his life story. We reluctantly acceded since the chicitas had now well and truly fled.

The cafeteria was only a couple of minutes-walk from the 'tute' room and by the time we'd arrived we'd struck up, by sufferance, an amiable conversation with Raoul, being our host's name. Being lunchtime, the place was replete with

students and a noise to match. Raoul went off to buy the coffees while we searched in vain from a free table. As luck would have it, we did spot a table at which two girls were seated which could easily accommodate another three. It wasn't until we reached the table that we realised that the two girls seated there were from the tutorial and most attractive indeed.

By this time Raoul had returned and asked the girls in English if we might join them. Their English was perfect. They were obviously studying English because they needed the extra credits and didn't want to overtax their curricula. We later discovered that they were the products of wealthy families who sent them abroad a couple of times a year for their holidays (maybe they could send me a broad also. Does anyone use that term anymore? Probably not).

Things were looking up and our spirits soared accordingly. We were quite taken by them and they seemed interested, beyond the point of curiosity we hoped, in us. I guess we were kind of novel - Australia's a long way from Costa Rica. In fact, Australia's a long way from anywhere, even other parts of Australia. And what did anyone in Costa Rica know of Australia? They were probably astounded as to how well we spoke English.

And so we chatted away, a scripted banter. Poor Raoul sat there trying spasmodically to engage in intelligent discourse but failing miserably at each attempt. Well, look what he was up against - two fools in the Fuck Capital of the World, interested only in doing a line on the girls. During the course of the conversation, at a point when Raoul was talking to the girls (their English was better than his), Michael and I exchanged surreptitious glances indicating our preferences. I fancied the brunette and, to my delight, his interest was in the blonde (it was a sad reality that all she needed to possess for Michael was a pulse).

Fantastic, I thought - they're attractive, intelligent and not at all fazed by our presence. Nothing could go wrong, go wrong, go wrong ... Then as if by divine intervention, as if to confirm that if there is a God, then he/she is mischievous if not downright maleficent, a guy appeared from nowhere, bent over and gave the brunette a peck on the lips to which she responded in kind. I sat there flabbergasted. She then simply excused herself and, hand in hand with the interloper, went off taking my plans with her.

"The swine," I mumbled as she disappeared through the swinging doors. "She can't do this to me!"

"It would appear she just did," whispered Michael who had overheard my imprecation.

“Well, maybe I’m lucky,” I rationalised. “If she’s going to be so inattentive now, what would she be like in a few hours? You just can’t trust anyone these days.” Strangely enough this amazing morsel of logic had a mollifying affect and I resumed my former composure, contemplating just how Michael was going to have his hopes shattered. It wasn’t long coming.

Raoul had, by now, obviously decided that any aspirations he had entertained of a cerebral exchange were irrevocably groundless and, referring to his timepiece, bid us a fond farewell without promising to keep in touch. And now we were three, but that too was only a temporary state of affairs. Michael’s intended quarry, probably feeling uncomfortable under his lecherous stare, offered a perfunctory excuse, and before he had the opportunity to ‘put the heavy’ on her, much to his mortification, she effected a strategic withdrawal.

Unfortunately, the cafeteria didn’t serve alcohol - what else could we turn to? Already Michael was coming down with a bad case of Scotch.

Completely deflated, we decide to leave the campus, find the nearest restaurant and eat the afternoon and our woes away. But fate hadn’t finished with Michael yet. The screw was to turn once more. As we were wandering dejectedly through the car park, who should we run into once more but the blonde, trying unsuccessfully to extricate her car from rather a tight situation.

Gallantly Michael offered his services and then, enlisting mine also, proceeded to ‘bounce’ the car into such a position that would facilitate a rear exit. (Ironic isn’t it? Since all he was interested in was a front entrance ...well, at first, anyway). Even before she had a chance to thank us, he asked if she’d like to go to the movie on campus that evening. Since he’d just spent a sweaty five minutes ingratiating himself to her, it was an offer she found impossible to refuse, although agonised seconds ticked by as, I suspect, she considered the gamut of believable excuses. After what seemed an eternity, she agreed to meet us just before the movie began and asked, unbelievably, if we minded if she brought one of her girlfriends with her. Mind! I almost kissed her feet! The wheel of fortune was back in business.

VI - CINEMA PARADISO

“By the way” I asked Michael after she’d departed, “What’s showing?” Fortunately, most of the movies we’d seen or at least heard about in Central America were in English with Spanish subtitles. Apparently, it was easier to insert subtitles than to dub them in Spanish, a practice which, in any language,

tends to detract from the quality of the movie anyway. Besides we found that our vocabularies were always augmented by the exercise.

“The Outsider,” he replied. “The screen adaptation of Camus’ book.” We agreed that it indeed sounded promising.

Alas, although it had Spanish subtitles, the damned dialogue was in Italian! Now, Camus, being French, can be abstruse enough in English at the best of times, but in Spanish and Italian, crikey! If, for instance, the film had relied more heavily on visual effects, our time in there would have passed much more quickly, but it dragged on and on with any philosophical significance being denied even the normally slim chance of filtering through. Perhaps because our focus wasn’t entirely on the film.

The girlfriend was exquisite and this was our first night in Latin America in the company of two such ravishing beauties as were with us now. The blonde (I can’t remember her name) had brought a girlfriend with her (henceforth referred to as another brunette, since I can’t recall her name either - says a lot about me doesn’t it?). Unfortunately the brunette spoke no English and, considering the fact that my Spanish was still in the embryonic, if not abortive stage, our conversation was restricted to such profundities as “What is your name?” and “What is your favourite television show?” questions at which I was now becoming quite adept at posing, if not answering.

To make matters worse I didn’t understand her answers anyway. That probably accounts for the fact that if I created an immediate impression, it wasn’t stunning, although on the odd occasion she did seem to have a tasered look on her face. I had to settle for being just another pretty face - look, that’s my take, and if that doesn’t convince the reader that times were tough then nothing will.

It was painfully obvious that nothing was going to eventuate. Besides, I’d left my language of love dictionary back at the hotel. Languages, I thought. Yech! Multilingual, bilingual, cunnilingual, you can have them! Well, most of them.

As a result of my social ineptitude (as Michael later referred to it) the chances of his night ending on a successful note (or mattress) had suffered an irrevocable setback. As the blonde had arrived with her friend, so she would leave with her. Actually, it occurred to me that she’d only brought her sidekick along as a chaperone, and never intended for one minute (too bad she didn’t realise Michael could take less), to kick on after the show - she simply wanted to repay a debt. Still, her ploy did enable Michael to give some vent to his frustrations and disappointments.

VII - PARADISE WELL AND TRULY BOLLOCKSED

“God, I feel like a jerk,” he ejaculated (metaphorically I hoped).

“That seems to be the only option you have left,” I riposted, “but for God’s sake keep the noise down.”

By the time we realised that we’d be going home alone, we also realised that we mightn’t be going back to the hotel at all - the last bus had departed. We finally managed to hitch a ride back with some sympathetic students who were driving towards the city themselves. They were probably paid to escort us off and far away from the premises. We were obviously operating on different premises than they.

We arrived back at the hotel after midnight and went straight to bed, just in time to catch the late-night 12.45 earthquake, mocking us from the cinema below.

SEVEN

BORDERING ON THE RIDICULOUS (August 1975)

I - DOUBLE-CROSSED

Who can guess how a border crossing in the Third World is going to turn out (send answers with a self-addressed envelope to the publishers) - it can take a few minutes or it can take as long as a week? Getting visas can be just as unpredictable, so one can imagine our relief on learning as we purchased our bus tickets to Piura, a hundred miles or so inside Peru, that visas to Peru were issued at the border with little or no delay. The reason, it seemed too good to be true, was simply because it was. But did we doubt it for one minute? No way, Senor Jose!

In some respect also, it was a relief to be leaving Ecuador. Quito had been delightful - its year-round spring climate had been perfect for exploring the charm of our first South American city; Quito wasn’t, in fact, the first city we had intended visiting on the continent. We actually had tickets to fly into Cali in Colombia and commence our South American odyssey there, but the reports of violence and crime were dissuasive enough for us to bypass that country.

It was a shame, personally, that we couldn’t do our Cali thing; I had a loose arrangement to meet an inamorata, Linda, a vivacious and free-spirited

girl, with whom I'd spent some special times in Sydney over the six months or so before our departures overseas. She had gone to the West Indies and I had headed off to Central America. We'd planned to rendezvous in Cali and travel through Latin America together. Sadly, there was no way I could contact her. We did, reconnect, about a year later on the northern New South Wales coast where we spent a couple of days together. But the magic had gone. My heart was elsewhere.

For me there was an unanticipated benefit in the change of plans. To see the faces, in Ecuador, that were the same as those that witnessed the atrocities of the Conquistadors over four centuries earlier and to breathe the scented air of the Andes, the world's longest mountain chain, was indeed a treat. Of course, the air wasn't always perfume-scented; what Michael had perpetrated on a room in Quito doesn't bear examining here.

The tanks rumbling through the streets enforcing the coup that was in progress hadn't overly perturbed us. The president of Ecuador, Guillermo Rodriguez Lara, had fled to the hideaway town of Baños and would re-emerge after the danger had passed as pass it did. (Is that where the expression flown the coup comes from?). And our journey down to the coast had been full of amazement - the sights so breathtaking that the adrenalin coursing through our veins - even when one of the bus's wheels wasn't hanging over a precipice, was fairly palpable.

I'd always wanted to see Mount Chimborazo crowning the northern Andes at over twenty thousand feet. Although almost ten thousand feet lower than Everest, Chimborazo, due to the equatorial bulge, is, in fact, the furthest point on the world's surface from the centre of the earth. Keep this point in mind - there may be a quiz at the end of this section.

But Guayaquil is another story. Hot, sticky, noisy, and a little too dirty, it was a great place to leave. I guess that's part and parcel of the backpackers' experiences; they find great places to leave. By virtue of the fact that Guayaquil has an excellent port, it is Ecuador's largest city. It does have some lovely parks but the heat in the summer months is so oppressive and the overcast days of the other months so gloomy that one is somewhat disinclined to partake of their splendour.

At one stage on the second day we took refuge inside a cinema and saw "Towering Inferno" - most apposite. As an added incentive to the cinema-goer, the reels were in order unlike some earlier experiences when the second and third reels had been interchanged - one can do this with dubbed American action films and most of the locals are none the wiser; they're only there to see the

blood and violence, so plots are at best, immaterial. Come to think of it, given the intellectual level of the plots, one probably wouldn't notice the difference if half the movies shown in English-speaking countries received the same treatment! Most of the movies at popular cinemas today fall into that category.

We stayed in Guayaquil longer than we had intended, besieged by the chimeric notion that we could get a cheap flight to the Galapagos. Two days of frustration ensued before we gave up and bought bus tickets to Piura, a pitiful substitute for these enchanted isles that helped clarify, for Darwin, his theses. I had to wait another ten years before returning and visiting those enchanted isles. Nevertheless, Piura was on the road south along the famous South American "Gringo Trail," and that was beckoning us onward.

II - VISA VIS

The ride to the border was uneventful. It took about five hours and we arrived shortly after midday. The driver, without care, unloaded the entire luggage from the roof - if you were lucky you managed to break the fall of your belongings as they reached the dirt (dislocated fingers were optional). If you were smart, you carried anything breakable and used old sacks to store any luggage that was to be transported on the roof. All the passengers lined up to complete customs formalities. Our turn came and we presented our passports.

"Where are your visas for Peru?" they wanted to know.

"We were told by the bus company that visas were issued at the border," was our reply. (How naive!)

Well, there was no way that we could be given a visa at the border. They were never issued there. We'd have to go back to Machala, about two hours away, and get them there. Needless to say, we were furious. The bus driver didn't want to know about us for any number of reasons. After all, he was only driving the bus - he didn't run the company. Who ran the company, we figured, was a small conglomerate that included the border officials. So, what appeared to be a quite reasonable fare, turned out to be just half of what we would end up paying - a neat scam.

He couldn't give us a refund and obviously he couldn't wait. There was no point in arguing with him. It was clear that we'd been ripped off, and short of going back to Guayaquil, we'd done half our tickets cold which, perversely, was the only relief from everything else which was referred to in degrees of 'hot'. So

the bus drove off to Piura and we sat by the roadside waiting for a bus going in the other direction via the inexplicably popular rest spot of Machala.

Two hours and a much-exercised glossary of expletives later, the bus arrived. The fare was inexpensive, only a few sucres. I reached into my pockets before I realised that I'd already changed all my Ecuadoran money in Guayaquil. Naturally the driver suggested we pay in Yankee dollars, this being all we had apart from a small wad of Peruvian sols at which he sneered.

Short of strong mercenary considerations, which my few sols didn't constitute, Ecuadorans and Peruvians weren't on the best of terms, and little respect was shown their respective currencies. They still contested a rather large tract of Amazonia and a comparison of maps printed in either of the two countries, will readily reveal this area of contention. The driver couldn't change a ten dollar note which was the smallest denomination we had, so after a bit of bickering, I saw the futility of any further discourse, shoved the money into his grimy paw and we made our way through a sea of grins to the back of the bus with not the slightest doubt that this game had been played many times before.

III - A CONSULECTOMY

We arrived in Machala in the late afternoon. The heat had dissipated a little and the sky was uncommonly clear. With packs on our backs we made straight for the Consul's office which we found with surprising facility. Could the gods be smiling on us? No way, San Josette! (Always good to give his wife a guernsey.) The Consul saw fit to attend his office only in the cool of morning. We had no choice but to seek lodgings for the night.

That was where we met Wade. Wade was a Cockney about the same age as us and had suffered the same fate regarding his visa. He'd arrived back in Machala about lunchtime just as the Consul was closing up, and the Consul, rather than stamp his passport in the few seconds that it takes to perform such an operation, brusquely informed him that the office was now closed and he'd have to return in the morning. Wade was smart enough not to persevere, and with resignation had gone in search of accommodation in which he secretly suspected the Consul had a stake.

We checked in to the same hotel, walked up the stairs to our room, took one look at it, dumped our packs in disgust and went looking for a snack, plenty of beer, and an overdose of forgetfulness.

IV - JUST A REGULAR GUY

Sleep was not a problem after a long and trying day and I slept soundly until about seven when the chattering of the birds outside our window roused me. Michael was still snoring contentedly so rather than disturb him I quietly donned my clothes and crept out in search of sustenance. The hotel bar doubled as a restaurant so I flopped into a seat near the cleanest part of the window and perused ("Peru"-sed!) the menu which listed but one course for breakfast - huevos fritos y frijoles (fried eggs and beans) and coffee - the common fare for this part of the world. The waitress, a pretty little mestiza, mouthed the words to herself as if to memorise them and scampered away in the direction of the kitchen, a place I had no desire whatsoever to visit.

I stared out the window and watched the town stirring for a few minutes before she returned with my breakfast on a warped laminex tray. The sight that revealed itself was hardly appetising. The eggs looked like any others whose connection with the flames was tenuous but the beans were something else! They had to be; otherwise they'd be eggs, silly! They didn't resemble the beans I'd eaten elsewhere - they were darker than usual and not loose on the plate as one might expect. Instead they had been mashed and fashioned into a sausage-like configuration that to all appearances looked like a larger than average-sized turd (not that I could consider myself an arbiter of turd size). This was really a close encounter of the turd kind! Surely, I couldn't be expected to destroy this paragon of regularity by eating it! It was then that my thoughts turned to Michael whose breakfast these days consisted of lomotil on toast.

As mentioned earlier, Michael's gastro-intestinal problems had continued seemingly without relief, and given that he was thus cursed, it goes without saying that it was open season on jokes scatological. Nevertheless, he remained good-natured about his repeated episodes and took the whole thin in his strides.

I carefully wrapped the beans in a serviette and placed them gently into my shoulder bag. I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do with them so I mulled over a few ideas as I finished the rest of my breakfast.

When I returned to the room Michael was just rising and preparing for his pilgrimage to the loo. While he was gone, I solemnly placed the morsel on his pillow along with a note inscribed boldly "Eat your heart out!"

V - A FEW FORMALITIES

I packed the few belongings I had used during our short stay here and when Michael came back a few minutes later he did the same. I kept one eye on him, waiting for him to notice the little memento I'd collected for him. When he did see it, he stifled a laugh and looked in my direction. I quickly averted my gaze and nothing was said. One point for me.

It still wasn't time to go to the Consul's office so I joined Michael and Wade, who had also just emerged, for a cafe con leche. Wade was also travelling the Gringo Trail. It's interesting how often people meet up again with others when they're travelling basically the same route. It creates an instant camaraderie I've not experienced anywhere else. For instance, we travelled with Wade as far as Lima, ran into him again two weeks later in Cuzco, didn't see him for another month or so until Santiago in Chile, and then spent time with him at various destinations in Argentina. Each time we stayed in or near the same hotels, shared meals and shared experiences. And there were many others whom we encountered over the coming months that we likewise spent time with.

We finished our coffees and made our way to the Consul. Needless to say, our experiences so far didn't have us brimming with optimism. In fact, quite the contrary, travelling in the Third World had made me both a devout cynic and pessimist. After all, what is a pessimist but an optimist in full possession of the facts. Just when you think you've worked out the system, someone like the Consul comes along to stuff it up or does something right. *Quién sabe?* (Who knows?).

His secretary greeted us with a smile and asked us to take a seat (they were all bolted to the floor; was she part of an elaborate practical joke, too?) while she informed the Consul of our arrival. No sooner had we sat down than the door reopened and the Consul himself appeared and, welcoming us cordially, ushered us into the inner sanctum. Still suspicious we let ourselves be seated around a huge rosewood desk that took pride of place in his room. He attempted to make polite conversation with us but quickly realising that our rudimentary Spanish would make such a foray very clumsy, and probably wasn't particularly interested in what my favourite television show was, asked for our passports, and within minutes we were back on the street walking towards the bus terminal ready to enter Peru.

VI - THERE SHE WAS JUST - A WALKING DOWN THE STREET

I don't remember where she came from but as my eyes flittered around the room of the customs office, there she was, a picture framed by the door, pack on her back and life in her eyes. Pale she was, with skin of alabaster and veins that swam like streams of lapis lazuli, meandering gently 'neath the surface. Her hair danced blonde on her shoulders and her eyes shone blue from within. She walked up to us and without ceremony, introduced herself and I responded meekly, retreating further into my shell.

It isn't pretty women that affect me so - there must be that charisma, an aura, and a chemistry that intoxicates me more than visually. When our eyes met, I knew it was there. It was inescapable. I let the others talk. Katharina from West Germany, travelling alone and heading south along the Trail, free as the wind.

VII - SICK AND HIDE

"Arriba!" broke the spell. Next in line. Get stamped out of Ecuador and welcome to one hundred metres of no-man's land. A hundred metres of stalls selling baubles, bangles and myriad other useless bagatelles which people ended up buying simply to get rid of leftover sucres or some of the sols which exceeded the allowable amount which one could import into Peru.

The bargaining was fierce although the stall owners knew they held the aces - "never give a sucre an even break," was their motto. The quota for each person was ten-dollars worth of sols which one could bring into the country. Bought with American dollars in Ecuador or Colombia, it was possible to get up to a hundred sols to the dollar compared to the official rate of forty-two inside Peru.

Needless to say, Michael and I were completely unaware of the currency restrictions when we each purchased our soles in Guayaquil. I bought two hundred dollars worth. I might be about to corner the entire market in useless Latin American wares in order to dispense with it I was left with but two alternatives - dice the cash or stash it and risk the customs checks. We collared some gringos heading in the other direction in order to discover what they'd encountered. The stories they told were not reassuring.

Peruvian aduanas were infamous among travellers for their rigorous scrutinies, overzealous body searches (this one, Michael didn't mind, particularly

when the word cavity was involved), and buses being virtually dismantled. This put more than the fear of God into one. What a decision! But \$200 is \$200 and on a budget of about eight dollars a day a fool and his money aren't easily parted - the fool, of course, referring to one who chooses to hide the money and take his chances.

I headed straight for the nearest toilet. So did Michael but for different reasons. For some reason inspiration frequently visited me when I was ensconced on a porcelain throne. The solution came to me in a splash, or flash, that is. During the last two months I'd strongly resisted throwing away my jeans. They had given me excellent service since the day I'd purchased them but by now had worn pretty thin. In fact, I had become quite proud of my patchwork and almost looked forward to detecting a new tear.

If the tear occurred in an easy to get at place, I would retrieve my small sewing kit which constituted one needle, half a reel of cotton and a Swiss army knife, and repair it immediately. If it occurred in an awkward position, I generally had to wait until I was sitting somewhere so I could surreptitiously divest myself of the jeans and then attend to the task. When, in cooler weather, I was wearing a poncho, this presented no problem, but at other times I was conscious of disapproving stares.

I figured that if I could change my smaller denominations into larger ones then I could easily insert these notes behind the patches without leaving any tell-tale lumps. So, much to my companions' bemusement, I exchanged my smaller notes with them, scurried back to the toilet, and with both amazing alacrity and dexterity, secreted (no pun intended) the money before reappearing, ready to run the gauntlet with a look of calmness and propriety neatly cloaking another one of abject terror and slightly soiled underwear. (Michael beware! You are not alone.)

The Peruvian customs office consisted of one of three buildings standing adjacent to each other with a boom-gate outside the far one, protruding obscenely across the road designating the border. These constructions were made of scrubbed timber sheltering under corrugated tin roofs. We entered the outer office and the secretary, needing no explanation of our presence, cast a supercilious eye at us and without a word, disappeared into the inner sanctum and seconds later re-emerged gesturing us inside.

Behind an impressive desk sat a singularly unimpressive little man who held out a claw of a hand and, with a voice that seemed to emanate from his nostrils, requested our passports. We duly handed them over and he nonchalantly examined them. Satisfied that all was in order, he asked us to complete our

money declaration forms. My swallow must have echoed around the room but I couldn't be sure - my heart was pounding too loudly.

I filled out the form with a studied indifference noticing at the bottom of the page, the rider informing me, I surmised, that for furnishing false information the penalty could be up to six months imprisonment as well as daily reruns of Hogan's Heroes - well, something like that. I could feel the perspiration as it trickled down my back. I passed the form back to him allowing eye-contact for only a fraction of a second. He gave it a cursory glance and promptly stamped it. Then he asked for our onward tickets. Apparently in order to enter Peru one must have a ticket out. Why was I not surprised?

Needless to say, this was news to us. What a coincidence that the shack next door happened to sell them! So in we went and asked for tickets for a cheap train ride from Cuzco into Bolivia. I don't remember how much he asked for the tickets. What I do remember is that he asked for payment in sols - more sols than one could bring into the country legally. So here we go again. Here I was with \$200 dollars worth of the things behind my patches, and for now, they were effectively useless. Amazingly enough he readily understood our plight and directed us to the first of these offices where he explained we could change some money. (Hey, Pancho, we've got some more gringos!)

We backtracked wearily into the building and produced our travellers' cheques. The exchange rate was extortionate but we had no option and they knew it. We returned to the ticket office, bought the tickets and walked straight across the border with not even a baggage search. Was someone having us on? Or more to the point, was there someone who wasn't having us on? Well, I wasn't about to question good fortune so I continued walking to the bus terminus without a backward glance.

VIII - COVERING THE GROUND

The four of us (yes, including the delightful Katharina) caught the next bus to Piura, a town of over 100,000 people situated at about an hour's drive from the border. Founded in 1532 by the Conquistadors, Piura is one of the oldest towns on the continent. And quite frankly, a new paint job wouldn't be out of the question.

It was during this short journey to Piura that we had our first taste of the Pacific landscape of Peru. The coastal belt stretches approximately fifteen hundred miles from Ecuador in the north to Chile in the south. Incidentally

these same geographical features are manifest for an equal distance into Chile. The band seldom ventures more than fifty miles from the coast whence begin the highlands and eventually the region known as the Montana (mountains).

I confess I'd never given much consideration as to what the landscape of this region would be like. Subconsciously I probably imagined it to be quite fertile, being nourished by the vast number of rivers that strike westward from the Andes in their short sprint to the ocean. Such was not the case.

The truth is that of the fifty-two streams emanating from the western side of that mighty mountain range, only ten contain sufficient water to guarantee their flow to the coast throughout the year. The others, not unlike the wadis in the Middle East, "aestivate" during the summer months only to flow anew in cooler times. Consequently, the land is stark and barren, the only vegetation being those hardy plants clustered around streams.

From the bus window the desert provided very little in the way of visual relief and we soon fell into reading, the noise of the bus not being wonderfully conducive to conversation. We reached Piura in the mid afternoon and within a short time found a cheap motel. The four of us decided to share one room ostensibly to save on costs. It was now becoming apparent that we all had designs on Katharina and unless she felt equally attracted to one of us, then it was going to be an interesting struggle by the boys as they performed the rites of courtship. We spent the rest of the afternoon ensconced in our room relaxing and harmonising our way through some songs to the accompaniment of the guitars we'd bought in Mexico the previous month.

IX - GAME, SET AND MATCH TO LOVE

Dinner for us, believe it or not, consisted of fried eggs and potatoes or so the menu would have us believe. It wasn't simply that the above was the only menu item that we could always readily translate, it was more so that the few other items here and in most other "cheap and nasties" were either less than appetising or the restaurant and, by association, the kitchen, would have had trouble gaining a health certificate in the slums of Calcutta.

Meat was to be positively avoided. Fortunately, the conversation was more sustaining than the food, or sleep would have overtaken us there and then. Michael and Wade suggested that for dessert we pay a visit to the nearest bar and become acquainted with the local brew. I preferred to become better acquainted with my bed by that stage and so bid them goodnight and started in the direction of the hotel. This move served two purposes.

First, I was feeling rather beat, but second, and probably more important, here lay a good opportunity to throw a catalyst among the pigeons for Katharina, whose intentions, if any, until now, by necessity, might only be guessed at. There was no doubt that Michael was interested - after all, she had a pulse, although a lack thereof probably wouldn't have constituted too much of a restraint for him. Michael often reminded me of Ambrose Bierce's definition of a debauchee: one who has so fervently pursued pleasure that he has had the misfortune to overtake it.

Anyway, her decision to either go to the bar or return to the hotel would at least give someone more time with her in order to stoke the embers on her behalf. This, of course, is assuming that she was in the slightest bit interested in one of us. She may have been genuinely tired or still thirsty or hungry.

I soon heard her footsteps as she joined me. She didn't feel like drinking which suited me just fine. I glanced over my shoulders and noticed the others looking in our direction - this was satisfying in itself. We repaired to the hotel, undressed, and plopped into our beds - there is no room for modesty in these places, it's just not practical.

By a rare stroke of fortune on my behalf and an uncharacteristic blunder on theirs, the boys didn't return for another couple of hours. Katharina and I spent that time getting to know each other, exchanging tales of our adventures in the New World. It had been nearly a month, in Guatemala, since I'd enjoyed a cosy chat with a woman, no less an attractive one.

She held my undivided attention as she told of the dream she had to come to South America, of that big decision to leave all behind and take a chance. I felt as if she was telling my story too. We were both searching, for to discover this continent and each other, we were also to discover new depths within ourselves.

We knew, before long, that we were kindred spirits, and our immediate futures in this land of our childhood fantasies would be moulded in an atmosphere of sharing. Our story, however brief it might be, was just beginning.

EIGHT

MACHU PICCHU INC.

(August 1975)

I - TONGUES IN CHEEK

Caught the overnight bus to Lima. There were five of us: Wade from London, Katharina from Germany, Michael from any bar in Latin America in which you cared to look, and yours truly (Okay, that's only four so I lied, but Michael was often beside himself with something or other.) Wade was a constant source of amusement for us whenever he attempted to converse in Spanish. His Cockney accent was so strong that he found it impossible to bend his tongue around words in Spanish. Actually, I've noticed that people, whose native accent is considered strong in their own country, have all sorts of problems with foreign accents. Katharina's English wasn't at all bad; she was pretty fluent and this facilitated our having many in-depth conversations. The only short-coming I found with our exchanges, was the cultural gap when it came to humour.

Michael and I, for instance, have always possessed pretty much the same sense of humour to the extent that when we were on a humorous roll, either of us could finish each other's sentences. This was one of our social hallmarks back home; we would often entertain others with our linguistic antics. And I, being a lover of the English language with all its nuances, loved wordplay, something which, sadly didn't include those whose first language wasn't ours. It might be worthy to note here that Michael had a wonderful knack with languages so getting his tongue around something was never going to be one of his shortcomings.

Michael and I sat together opposite Wade and Katharina. No significant exchanges had taken place between Katharina and me after the previous night's connection, although we did steal furtive glances to each other, making me believe there certainly was chemistry there. We chatted over the whining of the motor which needed a good oil, until the wee small hours before we decided to get a little shut-eye - I thought the sleep option was the most promising but still required the assistance of a mandy to help me accomplish that state. Besides, it was far better to take every precaution rather than sit up on an eighteen-hour bus ride and bear witness to the driver's and bus's road-holding abilities. The third world is replete with frustrated rally drivers, I was sure of it. And the quality of most of the roads can turn the most-tame Sunday outing into a rally. It was also far better to sleep than have ridiculous conversations with myself about things, which mattered nought.

II - HOW HAS LIMA BEEN?

Morning arrived but we hadn't and, despite all my attempts, I still hadn't found sleep. I'd spent the night either reading or cogitating over some cryptic crosswords I'd purloined from the last Australian Embassy I'd visited. They hadn't minded me cutting them out from old newspapers. At least they were being put to some sort of use.

We alighted from the bus in Lima and walked the ten or so blocks to the cheap hotel section where we finally settled on the *Hotel Europa*, a large colonial affair with strangely shaped rooms - the interior was probably designed by the same people who invented the tangram without actually providing a set of solutions.

I was still a little unsure about how we would resolve the sleeping arrangements. After all, except for our couple of weeks in Mexico and Guatemala where we'd travelled with a couple of French girls, Michael and I had always shared a room. Now, with the advent of Katharina, as well as Wade thrown into the mix, nothing could be taken for granted. I knew what I wanted to do and I hoped that Katharina was likewise inclined. Within minutes of walking into the hotel foyer, she left it in no doubt that I was the one with whom she'd wanted to share a room. I had to let Michael down gently and in as few words as possible. I settled for "Loser!" - sometimes one had to be cruel to be kind.

We spent the day wandering the streets before having an early meal and retiring to the hotel where we brought out the guitars and passed a few hours before calling it a night. I must confess that I was feeling somewhat shy until sometime, just before midnight, when Katharina came to me in my bed.

Lima, for me, is a city of juxtaposition. On one hand the influence of Spanish colonialism is rife, and on the other it is populated with people who, for the most part, seem somehow out of place. The colonisers always consign those they have colonised, to the streets and favelas and somehow, they still seem out of place, particularly in large cities like Lima in the dirty, dusty canyons of the built-up city centres. These streets were replete with beggars and families sleeping in doorways of office blocks.

Now I was faced with a new dilemma. We'd been given the number, by a friend in Sydney, of his friend, a diplomat, who had been living in Lima for a year or so, and Michael and I were expected to stay with him and his family and get the chance to see parts of the city we wouldn't otherwise visit.

I had only just connected with Katharina and was rather reluctant to jeopardise something that had only just captured my heart. But I felt it incumbent on me to spend a couple of days with Harold, our contact. So that's what we did. Actually, they were a lovely family who welcomed us with open arms. It was nice so spend time with a family after already a few months on the road. Harold and his wife Deborah, our contacts, were a little older than us and had two delightful children whom we entertained with music and magic. It was sad to say goodbye when the time came to leave.

Oh, and the other good thing about staying with the family was, because Harold was working as a diplomat, he had access to the best exchange rate for our dollar. Instead of us getting the market value of around forty-five sols, he managed to secure eighty. So, already we were finding travelling in Peru even cheaper than it would have been in normal conditions.

Wade and Katharina stayed another night in The Europa before leaving by train for Cuzco planning to meet us there four days hence. Apart from the advent of Katharina, Lima hardly waxes monumental in my memoirs of America del Sud - that's if you overlook the statue of Simon Bolivar which, in turn, overlooks the city's centre.

III - FLIGHT TO FANTASY

Michael and I took an early flight into Cuzco flying above the majestic Andes, arriving in that town towards midday on what seemed a beautiful early spring morning. The view from the small plane on which we were flying was sensational. Flying into Quito a few weeks earlier didn't really give us a chance to view the longest mountain chain in the world. I think that that was the first time I'd ever seen snow. And what a way to see it! The mild temperature in Cuzco

was quite atypical since it really doesn't start to warm up for another month or so, but no one minded.

Caught a taxi into the centre and managed to find ourselves embroiled in yet another argument with yet another taxi driver over the 'agreed-upon' fare. I cast a hundred sols to the floor on the passenger's side and we walked away to a few incomprehensible imprecations (the fact that he was imprecating in Spanish didn't help matters) from one who was now about three or five dollars richer for a trip, depending on which exchange rate one accessed, and which trip, in all likelihood, cost about half that amount.

We had arranged to meet Katharina and Wade at the *Gran Hotel Bolivar*. They were due to arrive the day prior to us. We located the hotel only to find that they hadn't booked in, nor had they had they left a note which would have been the logical thing to do. I wondered about their trip up from sea level to an altitude of 3,400 metres in a single day. This journey was notorious for two reasons: firstly, the unkindness of certain locals en route, and secondly, the problems associated with the change in altitude. We'd heard many harrowing stories about crime on the trains as well as the little oxygen balloons which were judiciously dispensed by the train staff, both, or either of which were enough to dissuade us from that exercise.

The uncertainty of Katharina's whereabouts started to concern me. I'd only known her for less than a week and until now had taken it for granted she'd be there and we'd continue where we'd left off in Lima. Suddenly I was missing her and felt a little anxious. Anything could have happened and I'd have no way of finding out.

Anyway, I didn't express this concern to Michael whose mind was elsewhere owing to the fact that his bowels had been dormant for a few days now and was eyeing a restaurant/bar just across the way. So, we sauntered in (we were really becoming quite adept at sauntering) and ended up sitting next to a couple of Australians whom we soon engaged in conversation. Michael O. (as if one Michael wasn't enough!) and Richard's story comes later but they remain in my memories for two reasons. The main reason is that we bumped into them a number of times over the next month, before somewhere south of Santiago in Chile where Katharina and I joined up with them and spent two of the most hedonistic and crazy months I've spent on the road anywhere.

The other reason is one that would pop up in my bulging book of coincidences. Five years later in Sydney, I was seeing a woman in Sydney quite regularly. Late one night at her place I was browsing through her record collection and noticed a Beatles album with Spanish titles and remarked that I

had one similar. "Oh, that's Michael's," she replied. "I must get it back to him." Now, I hadn't seen Michael since shortly after our return to Sydney all that time ago and there he was, about to re-enter my life, albeit briefly.

Michael O., Richard and I had spent up big in Buenos Aires buying over three hundred record albums at just under a dollar each as well as twenty or so leather jackets and sundry other items which we had stowed into a couple of trunks to accompany us on our cruise back to Oz. There was an apocryphal account of us smuggling some dope onto the boat but, for some reason, this remained an assertion that no one would confess to. The reunion was a night of debauchery that matched many of those on the other side of the world.

Katharina was still on my mind so I decided to wander out into the street in some sort of hope I would find her. I was beginning to feel a vague sense of loss of one so recently found and gone. Within fifty metres, however, I heard my name and there she was. As simple as that. She ran to my arms which I'd brought with me in case they'd come in handy, and that was also that.

Katharina and Wade had managed to meet two others on their trip to Cuzco. With them, and us now, were Bernard, a Swiss fellow who had recently reverted to conventional travel after purchasing a horse in Venezuela and riding overland through Amazonia into Ecuador - quite an adventure.

Our other new companion was Warren from Australia who, too, was in for some interesting experiences. He'd arrived in Brazil from the west coast of Africa where he'd spent some time. Three months later while we were in Rio, his name re-emerged. When we met him in Cuzco, he was complaining about getting over the clap he'd caught from an Australian girl, Liz, he'd shacked up with near Copacabana.

She was the heiress to a large fortune her parents had bequeathed her back home and was spending some time travelling across this continent. When I arrived in Rio with Michael and Richard (Katharina had stayed behind in Buenos Aires with a relative), we were in the process of checking into a hotel and the manager, upon hearing our accents, began telling us in Portuguese what turned out to be that there was an Australian girl staying in the hotel.

He was gesturing with his hands in a manner, we thought, that he had arthritis in both hands; what we finally realised was that he was indicating that this girl possessed massive breasts. Well, so what! But within seconds there she was, coming around the corner almost in slow motion, breasts appearing first followed soon after by the rest of her. "Hi, I'm Liz." Faint recognition in my mind. Turned out that she was one and the same who had left her mark on Warren.

Forewarned is forearmed. We were shown to our room with Liz hanging in our wake. The room was pretty basic, two flimsy-looking beds constructed of iron and wire, and another bed which was pieces of bamboo thrown together in the hope that they would hold. We plonked ourselves onto the beds to discuss our dinner plans since evening was approaching. Liz started to sit on the bamboo bed where I was ensconced but, realising it was in imminent danger of collapsing under my weight alone, thought better of it and took her place beside Richard. Did anyone actually invite her in? I don't remember. Anyway, she quickly produced a full bottle and half of another of Aguadiente (Brazilian firewater) which was about 80% proof and took a sizable gulp before passing it around.

After a few swigs each the conversation nosedived, not having reached heady delights thus far. We must have knocked over the entire contents of the booze within half-an-hour and we were all getting pretty pissed. It was then that our new-found friend decided to relate a story about lighting matches by farting on them. Well, I never! She then proceeded to pull a box of matches from her bag and, bending over, commenced to fart on an unignited match.

I've since learned, and not through personal experience, that if one were to indulge in such a practice, then first, the match must be lit and second, the sudden onslaught of methane on the object would send out a flare. But no one seemed to know this at the time. So there we were, four gringos, pissed as parrots trying to ignite unlit matches by farting on them through our clothes. Good grief! All the while trying desperately not to fart too vigorously lest the unthinkable happen. It was bad enough that our knickers would never be the same again.

During this ordeal we managed to completely consign the bamboo bed into a pile of splinters in the corner of the room. And this, as we began to realise, presented another problem - where was I to sleep?

I woke up the next morning in Liz's capacious bed. Awareness of where I was, came slowly as I gingerly opened my eyes thinking I had a wonderful but double-visioned blurred view of Sugarloaf crowning the bay. Fool! Liz's flimsy night attire had fallen away and I was actually confronted with her enormous boobs standing more upright than I had in weeks, blocking the way. Talk about implants! Talk about twin peaks! Talk about getting back to my reminiscences of Cuzco!

Meanwhile, back in Cuzco and after having re-established acquaintances and making some new ones, we all repaired to a local restaurant where the number was rapidly swelling with gringos. The wine fairly flowed and the food was more than abundant - nothing fancy, mind you, but enough to please the palate of any gourmand.

After a couple of hours of gluttony someone, in a rare moment of sobriety, suggested we look for accommodation. We proceeded through the ritual of settling the bill - la cuenta as it was known here. This ritual involved a pen and a serviette whereby everyone's name was written down and a column was devoted to recording everything they could remember eating. A tally was then made.

This system was pretty successful. Not that it really mattered, since it was rare to be confronted with a bill of more than three dollars. I guess it was the budget mentality that we'd all assumed when backpacking. Besides, Michael's wine bills in Australia were legendary and no one wanted to subsidise his libations. He would always have 'one for the road' to the extent that I often wondered whether his intimacy with street directories matched that which he achieved with his dates.

Michael O. and Richard's hotel was full which was a bit of a nuisance since the less walking around I had to do, the better. The altitude was still bothering me as it would for the next few days. We tried one place, which looked all right until we examined the rooms and found we'd be sharing them with fleas. Warren decided, however, that the fifty-cent tariff was an offer he couldn't pass up so took a room. He was nothing if not game, was our Warren. To me it just didn't come up to scratch.

We went a little up-market and found a room for about a dollar-fifty each. It was a cold, unwelcoming cell with metal beds which prolapsed sadly in their middles. The floor was tiled although most of the tiles were cracked now and sorely in need of a grouting.

Katharina and I pushed our beds together in wild erotic anticipation and rotated our mattresses ninety degrees in a vain attempt to counteract the prolapse and accomplish some sort of configuration that wouldn't leave us in the incipient stages of hemiplegia by the end of the night's ravages. For the next two nights, by virtue of the fact that we were back in each other's arms and on top of the fact that we could not achieve a suitable level of comfort when sleep finally beckoned, we were left, us both, somewhat, worse for wear.

One thing we were surprised by was the lack of altitude sickness which we had expected now that we were just short of 4,000 metres above sea level. A few of our fellow gringos had experienced mild headaches but that was all. I guess it

helped that the room next to ours was occupied by a couple of friendly German fellows, one of whose fathers had designed Frankfurt or Hamburg airport, I can't recall which. They were in the process of packing up to fly out two days hence. They asked us in for a pisco or two and then one of them, and I'm not sure what possessed him to do so, detached the heel of one of his boots and exposed the hollow he'd created that was full of coke to smuggle home. They divulged that both sets of heels of the boots they were wearing contained enough of the stuff to see them living the high life for quite a few years on their return to the fatherland. They produced some straws and, well, made an offer we couldn't refuse. Suffice it to say, walking and sometimes running up and down the hilly streets of Cuzco was a lot easier than I ever suspected. High times in the Andes, indeed.

IV - IN SEARCH OF THE BALLET LLAMA

Our first day in Cuzco saw us wanting to explore some of the sights and sites on the outskirts of town.

"You want to go to sexy woman?" the taxi driver asked leaning out of his window displaying a personable grin. "Two dollars for everyone. Three hours." Good God! They'd seen us arrive. I surveyed the area and didn't notice any men wearing white lab coats who had come to return us to the psychiatric ward. This offer was worth taking up if only to check out the woman.

I turned to gauge Michael's response but he was already standing by the taxi in the process of continuing negotiations. Now that he had returned to glowing health, his libido was ready to break out and, quite frankly, I had no desire to be there when it happened. Despite the fact that I'd been travelling with him for nearly two months now, I still retained some sense of what was right and decent in a world a moral turpitude into which he possessed frequent flyer accreditation.

It took a few minutes and an equal number of retractions on Michael's behalf to realise that Quenco, Pisac, and Sacsayhuaman were, although hitherto unknown to us, famous Incan ruins. The latter was pronounced by the locals, much to their amusement, "sexy woman", a ruse to titillate gormless gringos whose psyches were permanently fused to their gonads.

Since Michael had already thrust himself into the vehicle and bargained the fare down to about a dollar eighty, we realised it was going to be a fruitless essay to extract him. A glimmer of hope was all he ever needed. Sometimes he operated when there existed no hope at all. Why, I recall the debacle he created several years before in Sydney when... but perhaps now's not the time.

So we visited those places, took the obligatory shots and returned to Cuzco. I guess I shouldn't be so blasé - these places were magnificent. Especially Sacsayhuaman where the conquistadors decimated the local population four hundred years ago. To look at the peaceful site these days with its silent fortresses and llamas grazing contentedly in the shadows is a far cry from the mayhem that once took place.

Some of the stones used to construct the walls were twice the height of Michael even before his affliction had struck! They are bigger and even more impressive than those at Machu Picchu itself. No two stones are the same yet they fit together perfectly like a jigsaw without the slightest space between in much the same way that the interiors that most Mexican, in our brief experiences, had packed into their buses, the only difference being that it was easier to get a response out of some of the stones.

V - GAME PLAN

Now, visiting Machu Picchu could be achieved in a number of ways. Back in 1975, there was a hotel at Machu Picchu named, with all the flair and imagination that the Peruvian Government could conjure, *Tourist Hotel*. It must have taken a committee and several million sols to arrive at that name. That much money could have kept a whole community of street families fed and clothed for a year in Lima with shots of pisco sour all round.

Now this place was expensive - \$15 per night which was more than the average backpacker had at his or her disposal. Besides, our guide book, *The South American Handbook*, which everyone simply referred to as *The Bible*, didn't recommend. There was also a hut next door for which about fifty cents would give you floor space which would be shared with however many other gringos fronted, as well as a reputedly large and carnivorous selection of that well-known subphylum of arthropods under the nomenclature, *Insecta*. Neither of these options appealed to us.

There did exist three other options to visit the ruins at Machu Picchu. Firstly, the day trip. This meant paying twenty dollars, catching the train from Cuzco at seven, arriving towards noon, tramping around in a group of thrill-seekers manqué, and being herded back to Cuzco late that same evening. I could just imagine - they'd probably even have Barry Manilow music piped through the sound system on the train. A rockin' old time. Attending a Tupperware party would have had greater allure!

The second option was the walk along the Inca Trail, a trek of up to a week. This would have been worth serious pondering had the altitude not still been affecting me. Katharina was in agreement while Michael, for whom physical exercise was not a favoured pursuit, sighed in relief.

Wade, who had actually brought a small one-man tent, was ready to start walking immediately. Warren, on the other hand, was undecided. He sat in the bar scratching, not only his head, but other portions of his anatomy, before deciding not to decide until the morrow after which time Wade would have departed anyway. He said he'd let us know as he exited and sauntered back towards his hotel affecting a strange series of gyrations every few steps. So, although he scratched himself from our company to visit Machu Picchu he would be simpatico with us in more ways than one over the ensuing months.

The option upon which we settled, was to take the train to the village of Aguas Calientes which was nestled between a series of precipitous cliffs about three kilometres from the Machu Picchu station. This we'd do two days hence.

VI - PONCHO HONCHO

I'd bought a poncho in Lima for the colder days ahead. It had cost about ten dollars after bargaining and I was quite pleased with it; I liked the design and its various shades of brown ensured it wouldn't show up the dirt I was sure to attract.

The night prior to departing for Machu Picchu we'd wandered around the night markets in Cuzco. These were pretty rudimentary. There was little or no electricity with lanterns being more reliable in an area prone to blackouts. The ground was wet and muddied by substances, the composition of which I preferred not to contemplate (I always put my shoes as far away from my bed as possible).

I picked out a felt hat which, when worn with a poncho, helped me to blend in remarkably well with the locals. The hat set me back a few bucks but was a great investment, finally meeting its demise about ten years later in Sydney at the hands or mouths of moths. I actually wore it around Sydney for a couple of months even showing up early one morning to surprise Anne, a beautiful and mysterious woman I'd met on the boat ride back to Australia and who held my heart for the ensuing few months - I poked my head, *en chapeau*, through her ground floor window in Elizabeth Bay, just before daybreak, only to discover

that she had departed for parts unknown; the startled occupant of the room was quickly placated amidst my profuse apologies. The hat certainly needed retiring.

Anyway, I remained browsing in the Cuzco markets when a local approached me and began speaking in Spanish. I quickly set him straight and discovered that he was interested in buying my poncho. Why? I asked myself. The next minute he was offering me ten bucks in soles and my eyes were going dring, dring! like a cash register. I ended up selling it to him for close to fifteen. I couldn't believe it.

What was so special about the thing, I'd never know. Anyway, five minutes later I purchased another poncho, not too dissimilar the first one, for about eight dollars. The only real difference was this one didn't have the word Armani on the label stitched into the hem. This was better than making a killing on the stock exchange. Well psychologically anyway. This bought me two extra days in South America.

VII - FUTURE SCHMOCK

Nearly ten years later I was back. This time with Debbie, Steve and Dave, all with whom I'd travelled extensively in other parts of the world.

It was New Year's Eve 1984/5 and we were strolling around the markets in the Plaza de Armas as I'd done on my previous visit. It all seemed so familiar, the smells (whilst standing downwind of my two male companions), the sounds and the wares hadn't changed much. Nobody came up and offered to buy any of my clothes - I had no need for a poncho in December and maybe that was the only item of my apparel that approached fashion in these parts.

Steve had somehow managed to engage a lone French woman in conversation and they tagged along with us for some obscure reason. She must have been really lonely. Perhaps there was safety in numbers as well as contraceptives. He never introduced us and he seemed happy enough to keep it that way. He'd been more than once bitten. It wouldn't have been the first time that someone other than he, himself, had sabotaged a blossoming liaison.

There seemed to be an atmosphere of expectancy approaching midnight as typifies all New Year's Eves. Well, after a while a few fireworks did their thing and we returned to the hotel without Steve who, although his friend's lips were telling him *non, non*, he had every confidence that there was *oui, oui* in her eyes.

There was certainly something in his eyes as if he was trying to remember a scene from long ago. Perhaps it was his last encounter.

We hadn't been back more than fifteen minutes when the lights went out. This wasn't unusual so we lit the candle provided by the hotel for such occasions before drifting off to sleep with 1985 close on its heels.

Huevos fritos means fried eggs in Spanish and no matter how many times I've ordered these ubiquitous little morsels in Latin America, they nearly always look the same, as if they've been cloned. They're always runny, always cold and always garnished with fragments of shell. A whole continent has got it wrong! Not to mention Mexico and Central America. I shouldn't complain really, since I was stupid enough to order them time and again. It's just that the choices were not legion. Apart from meat, which only a very brave man would ask for, frijoles, was the only other alternative and some of the ways in which frijoles were presented could induce the opposite of a Pavlovian response.

So here we were eating this familiar breakfast on New Year's Day 1985. After we'd been sitting in the cantina for almost an hour, Steve poked his head inside looking a little shell-shocked (had he observed the garnish?). There was nothing unusual about him turning up after the appointed hour - it would be disturbing if he didn't. Back in Sydney he is never told the same appointment time that others are. Depending on the importance of the occasion, there exists a sliding scale of up to two hours, that his acquaintances have been employing for years.

The story with which he regaled us was not unfamiliar. He had spent the last half-hour before midnight working on a strategy to get the woman into his clutches. The fact that she was still there as the last seconds of 1984 breathed their last was indeed testimony to her questionable judgment which had hitherto remained undetected. Just as he had manoeuvred her to the point of passionate embrace, the earth moved. Not only for them but also for everyone who was in the Plaza de Armas at midnight.

The guerrilla group known as The Shining Path had exploded a bomb in the square. What Debbie and I heard and thought was the culmination of the festivities was, in fact, the sound of the bomb itself, blistering the square. Steve never saw the girl again after the explosion. Well, he did see her briefly as he avoided trampling on her as he led the frenetic exodus from the area. It made a

pleasant change to observe his face the morning after without the tell-tale signs of rejection.

We never did discover any information about casualties. The next morning, we caught the train to Aguas Calientes as I set out to revisit the past.

VIII - IN THE GENES

So now let's go back to ten years earlier. Michael, Katharina and I managed to procure a seat on the train to Aguas Calientes at the last minute. Thank god for my poncho! As I was mounting the steps into our carriage my jeans tore yet again. I was determined that they were going to make the distance. Already they were about a dozen patches on them from previous occasions when I'd had to split in a hurry.

By the time I left South America three months later - did I write months? Maybe they were the culprits. Anyway, three months later when I departed for Australia's sunny shores, I carried in my luggage this same pair of jeans which had more than earned their retirement. They had been on their last legs, mine, for most of the journey and boasted seventy-six patches on the back and little if any of the original material was still present. I used them as a wall hanging until a female companion prevailed upon me in a moment of weakness, to get rid of them, whereupon they were reluctantly consigned to the garbage much to my retrospective regret. How could I betray them so? It must have been in my genes.

IX - SPRINGS ARE IN THE AIR

The trip itself, for the most part was quite interesting. The train leaves the valley by a series of about a dozen zigzags taking its passengers further up the valley each time before continuing through the valleys in search of our destination. It's a great way to observe the life styles of the locals. Train travel through cities and towns always is.

Michael had befriended an Argentinian fellow named Jorge who was doing a bit a travelling himself. Apparently, he had visited Machu Picchu before or in a previous life, I couldn't quite understand, and he agreed that spending a night in Aguas Calientes was a good idea; that's where he was headed. He knew that village and confirmed that there were a couple of hotels there. There were also some hot springs, hence the name of the place.

He had ingratiated himself with Michael to the extent that he'd assumed the role of our personal cicerone while we were there. He also believed, as he'd informed Michael, that he had a certain way with the local women. Michael was all agog that he should keep close company with Jorge because he was convinced that he was going to attract women like flies. Personally, I've always been wary of any creature with more than four legs. There didn't seem much to see or do here but whatever it was, with Jorge's nose for it, we'd be sure to find it.

X - YOU CAN'T HIDE THOSE PRYING EYES

We arrived late afternoon, a little excited by our proximity to Machu Picchu. There were three hotels and that word has to be used with a great deal of licence. The first, which one virtually stepped into upon alighting from the train being literally three metres from the tracks, comprised three rooms each accommodating eight people in four double-bunks. It didn't beckon strongly.

Across the tracks was a converted hospital which, for a small village, was tiny by necessity, possessing a couple of dormitories wherein maybe a dozen people could bed down - they couldn't bed up because there were only single bunks. These were the two recommended places to stay according to Jorge. We didn't even bother to look at the remaining hotel. The first one began to look good and since ours was the last train through the place for the day we settled on it.

Our room looked right onto the tracks but before long our view was interrupted by swarms of children peering through our curtain-less windows to watch and laugh at the gringos. A swarm of children isn't one that bothers the traveller greatly. After they breach that point, the collective word for them becomes 'plague'.

Once it became dark outside, we resisted the desire to light candles, for that was the only source of illumination, and shortly after, the kids departed. It gets dark very quickly because the village, being surrounded by high cliffs in every direction, is overtaken by shadows mid-afternoon. Once the kids had gone, we began to make ourselves at home, rearranging our packs out of sight of prying eyes.

At this stage there were just the four of us occupying the room and it looked promising. This was bordering on privacy. Needless to say, that when we woke the next morning the room was full. It was full shortly after midnight when the last occupant bedded eider and commenced sleeping with such stertorous

gasps that I thought the whole mountainside was in the process of disintegrating. It was not a night during which I slept much. I wonder if the reader may see a pattern here.

XI – SPA-ING PARTNERS

By six it was completely dark, the only light being that of candles in dwellings across the track. We needed sustenance for the long something or other ahead. Jorge escorted us to the only restaurant in the village. It was a solitary room, but then most restaurants are, with two long tables and benches. We weren't the first ones there. We hadn't seen other gringos since we'd arrived but there they were - six women of roughly our age - and the bonhomie was fairly flowing (I was more partial to a cheap white).

There was also a local red which christened "Grunge Hermitage" - some Aussies, sometime later, took a fancy to the name and, after a minor vowel movement...well, the rest is rather vintage. These gals were from Australia and New Zealand and had returned from the ruins after having spent the day there. I had no idea what they'd been drinking but it soon became apparent that they weren't going to be a great source of information re our excursion the following day. But one look at the countenances of my two male amigos also suggested that it was not information that they were after.

Dinner seemed to take an eternity. They served one dish at a time, so by the time they'd served ten individual dishes everyone was in a fine state of inebriation and those first served were waxing hungry again. The alcohol deadened the taste buds and that was probably just as well. Hell, we didn't even know what we'd ordered!

Jorge had a glint in his eye and it wasn't from the candles. He informed us that he could take us to the hot springs which were on the other side of the village. This was not to take place the next day, but immediately. The village extended into a gorge for about a hundred metres and the springs were the same distance past the outskirts.

So, the scene was this: an entourage of ten people snaking up a narrow path using torches to show the way. We must have raised a hell of a din giggling, swaggering and staggering over what would normally be a little peaceful track. Any locals perchancing to look out their window might be excused for believing in dragons. At least it was a happy dragon.

We finally arrived at our objective - there were two cemented holes in the ground into which flowed the warm water from the underground springs. Ten or so metres away, a fast running stream gurgled over the rocks, something a couple of my companions had already done in transit. It seemed I was the only one who possessed a swimming costume but once the few torches had been extinguished and everyone else had disrobed, I did what the Romans had done - well, not everything the Romans had done, but lots of things the same. It must have been in stark contrast to the diurnal activities of the place. Michael and Jorge couldn't believe their luck. Me, well I couldn't complain since Katharina was there, although I confess that I secretly wished that, just for the briefest of moments and for just this time, she wasn't. A fool such as I.

The two poolettes, for they were only small, were of different temperatures so the procedure was to begin in the cooler of the two, proceed to the warmer one before dashing into the stream for some reason. The stream water was probably freshly-melted snow or ice - it was bloody cold yet we continued to repeat the ritual that some fool had initiated. Ten naked bodies cavorting gaily, without a care. It was all I could do to stop myself reaching for a torch.

My eyes were beginning to sting from the strain. One might imagine that after one immersion in the stream that some degree of sobriety would have interposed itself and that sanity would have reigned again. 'Twas not to be. The euphoria and whatever else that had gripped the entire troupe continued for about an hour until the burgeoning sobriety and collective subconscious took hold and, spontaneously, everyone emerged and began drying and dressing.

XII – EARLY TO BED

So the long and winding dragon headed a little less noisily back towards the village. The effects of the alcohol hadn't completely abated and I sensed an atmosphere of anticipation, at least with Jorge and particularly Michael who was looking a trifle under the weather (there was a low cloud ceiling).

As we arrived back to the ex-hospital where the girls were staying, someone asked us in for more drinks. I couldn't see who had issued the invitation but it sounded suspiciously like Michael in falsetto. And before anyone managed to share or confirm my suspicion, Michael, in the richest of baritones, had cheerfully accepted and was half-way through the door - I'm referring to the top half because as he approached the door he tripped and found himself in a horizontal position much earlier than he planned. Jorge followed him in.

Katharina and I saw it as an opportunity to be alone and, taking the torch, climbed down onto the tracks en route to our bunkhouse. It had been just over eleven-and-a-half hours since we'd enjoyed the private pleasure of each other's company so the boys' decision to remain on the other side of the tracks was sorely welcome. We tiptoed through the first of the two rooms so as not to disturb anyone who might be there and closed the door gently behind us as we entered ours.

We needn't have bothered. We were not alone. Our olfactory sense should have warned us long before we approached. Whoever was there was either in an advanced state of decomposition or hadn't bathed in this calendar year. Well, there wasn't one, but three Peruvians (imported workers, as we later discovered) with whom we'd be sharing our solitude. As I directed the meagre light from my torch at them, they smiled confusion through broken teeth. Yes guys, we're coming to your pyjama party too. Fuck it!!

I wondered how the lads were going. At two o'clock I was still wondering, and why not? There was nothing else to do. At five past two I stopped wondering. There was an almighty racket at the door and in burst another boarder. He threw his belongings to the floor and climbed into an unoccupied bed that happened also to be the one Michael had designated for himself. But that didn't matter since Michael probably wouldn't be back before sunrise anyway. I wondered whether he'd be up for accommodation over there as well. All this wondering was making me tired. Too bad about the noise emanating from our bunk buddies. The snores, the flatulence as well as grunts and coughs and sniffles, made this place one to remember. It was also one I've tried to forget.

So I lay there, at times wondering and at other times pondering (variation saves boredom), until another unfamiliar noise assailed my ears. Outside the night had been still. Any creature that had dared to wander past would have had the stripes or spots scared off it by the cacophony inside and hightailed it into the jungle. There was definitely human movement (I'll let that one pass). I peered out the window and saw nothing, but there was undoubtedly someone moving on the other side of the tracks.

Then came the cry of a human voice. Well, sort of human.

"Ken, are you awake?" Yep, it was Michael. Well that ruled out the human element. Shit! What do I do? I thought. Could I leave him over there in some kind of plight? Sure I could, but would he quieten down? That was unlikely.

"Yeah, what do you want?" I half whispered. I suspect I could have shouted and, except for Katharina, wouldn't have disturb the other occupants. These people can sleep through anything.

"I can't get across the tracks. I don't have a torch."

"Well, you were carrying one for someone a couple of hours ago," I remarked. I couldn't help myself. I needed to get mileage out of something.

"Okay, I'm on my way," I continued wearily.

You had to feel sorry for him. The poor bugger was still half pissed and had met with more than one rejection during his visit. Not only that, but he'd actually tried earlier to get across and, not being able to see, gave up and returned, prepared to spend the night in the only spare bed there. Apparently, he'd fallen into the bed (without fracturing it) and dozed off only to wake a short time later saturated. Someone had pissed in that bed and then claimed another. Michael, himself was too pissed to realise it until it was too late.

So Michael arrived back with us in a sick and sorry state, fumbled noisily through his gear looking for cleaner clothes, it's all comparative when you're travelling with a backpack, and fell into his bed onto the stunned occupant who had obviously assumed it was a free one.

Life, at that moment for Michael, could have been better.

XIII - LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

There was movement long before dawn. The alarm was barely audible over the cacophony in our room. Actually, had I been able to see my watch I could have woken them since sleep's visits to me had been only of the fleeting variety. It must have been about five and we had to get moving since the trucks with the workers left the station at Machu Picchu to drive up to the ruins at six. It was imperative that we reach the ruins before sunrise. We travellers had to beat the tourists.

We donned our clothes and started trudging the three kilometres along the train track in the dark to our first destination. Jorge soon caught up to us bearing a self-satisfied grin, the smug bastard! I know because I shone the torch on him to see who had been following. Michael, thank God, didn't notice.

There was little or no conversation as we continued along. Any attempt at meaningful discourse was destined to failure and before long prattling on any subject was rendered even more meaningless by the stream which had turned into a turgid and deafening white-water which had now become the Urubamba River which, in turn, would debouche into the mighty Amazon. So, on we lumbered.

Soon we came to a tunnel through that part of the cliff that ran down to the water. There was no other way around it so, with me leading with my torch, we plodded on. There was no way of knowing how long the tunnel was since it was still dark. But its confines served only to magnify the roar of the river. We must have walked about a hundred metres when we noticed two very strong lights approaching from the other end. Jorge screamed "Train!" and I bet Michael wished he hadn't changed out of the clothes he was wearing earlier last night, putrid as they were. There was no point in running and, even if we thought we could outrun the vehicle on normal terrain, there was no way we could achieve this along railway tracks.

"Don't panic!" I screamed seven or eight times in amazingly rapid succession. Nothing else - that was my sole contribution to salvation. There were probably other alternatives, none of which came readily to mind. Then spontaneously we all threw ourselves to the place where the wall of the tunnel meets the ground. And waited. And waited some more. We could see the lights getting closer and closer but excruciatingly slowly. Why was it taking so long? We could have crawled out in the time it was taking to reach us. Death where is thy sting?! I couldn't stand the torture of not knowing.

Two minutes later the lights arrived. Two workmen with heavy-duty torches received the shock of their lives upon discovering four prostrate bodies lying beside the tracks. We smiled the smile of acute embarrassment as we dusted ourselves off and recommenced our trek. They, themselves, merely shrugged their shoulders in bemusement as they, too, trudged off. There really wasn't a lot to encourage conversation.

XIV - ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

We arrived at the point where the bus takes tourists up the zigzag climb to the ruins, over five hundred metres above, just after dawn. There is no hint from below just what magic awaits on reaching the lofty saddle on which Machu Picchu sits.

We joined the workmen in the back of their truck and got at least an hour's head start on the first tourist microbus.

The ascent was painstakingly slow with no straight stretch extending more than fifty metres before another hairpin takes you onto the next stretch. The trick is not to sit on the side, which is exposed to the view below. The average tourist or those not used to tackling heights, would not welcome such a sight.

But to those of us who have conquered the dreaded Aguas Calientes tunnel, nothing was going to faze us.

And there we were. If I never took another trip, then I could rest assured that I hadn't missed the most awe-inspiring, most beautiful sight I could witness. Years later and having visited around a hundred and fifty countries, that statement still stands.

Many still mistakenly refer to Machu Picchu as the lost city of the Incas and it's a shame, in a way, that it's not. Obviously, the sobriquet of "lost city" has its attraction well steeped in mystery. When Hiram Bingham rediscovered Machu Picchu in 1911 he was convinced that this was the fabled city and the archaeological world had little reason to think otherwise for more than fifty years. Vilcabamba, the actual "lost city", is somewhat further downstream and doesn't in any way approach the majesty of Machu Picchu.

What confronted Bingham in 1911 bears little resemblance to what the visitor sees today. It was no wonder the Spaniards never found it and it wasn't until Bingham began excavating that he realised the extent of the beauty he'd rediscovered.

Today, the ruins have been stripped of the vegetation that had shrouded them for nearly four hundred years. The visitor experiences a view of the ruins as they must have been at the end of the age of the Incas. Incidentally, soon after Bingham's news reached the States, an expedition from Yale was sent to pick the locks.... but seriously, a team from Yale came down to explore further and yielded some strange results: the skeletons showed a ratio of ten females to every one male! Ay caramba!!! We'd arrived too late to take advantage of the ratio, this time by a few centuries.

If I included only one photograph in this volume it would be the view of Machu Picchu upon arriving. And even then, it would fall way short of capturing the grandeur of the place. Mere words would fall even shorter still. Just go there; there's not a more spectacular and moving sight on this planet.

XV - A WALK IN THE RUINS

We spent the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon wandering the terraces, stone staircases, temples, irrigation canals etc. A singular experience.

Directly behind and towering over Machu Picchu is the peak of Huayna Picchu offering a breathtakingly panoramic view across Machu Picchu and down

into the river valley. In fact, arguably the best panorama of the place is available there. The guidebooks suggest that the path to the top is not for those who suffer from even a light form of vertigo. I've never been at ease at altitude but, hey, have I mentioned the Aguas Calientes tunnels recently? The trek should take about an hour and the steps can be dangerous especially after wet weather.

The first part of the walk is straight around the side of the cliff face along a path that can barely fit two people side by side. It can make passing a rather intimate experience and a whole lot of fun. After about a minute's walk we came upon two girls also on their way to the top. They weren't going as fast as we were - they were crawling, which, at first, looked a bit ridiculous. Then we understood. The drop from the path was a sheer one of two hundred metres or so to the rocks and the Urubamba far below. I must confess to stifling a giggle. That was just prior to appreciating the full extent of the drop. Fortunately, I always carried a spare set of knickers and Michael, well what can I say about his need for a quick change? It seemed that his bowels were forever undergoing a process of elimination.

I really can't be sure what the rest of the climb was like. I chickened out. I suppose for those who reached the top it must have been breathtaking.

Ten years later when I revisited, I made myself complete the climb. It wasn't physically difficult at all and I was quite the fittest of the foursome. But upon reaching the summit I was the only one drenched in perspiration. Fighting fear will do that to you. It was my own personal fear, of course. I was never in any real physical danger, but I did feel a little brave. Bravery recognises fear and conquers it - can he who feels no fear be brave? But how it was worth it! Everything laudatory that I'd read or heard was true. The last time I felt a little brave I was removed from the reservation.

On both occasions when I returned to Cuzco, I was a happy man.



INCONTINENCE THE FINAL SPILL

NINE

AN AFTERTHOUGHT OR TWO OR MORE (OTHER PLACES, OTHER TIMES)

I - RETROSPECTION

I had intended leaving this series of fortunate or otherwise events after the Cuzco experience but then, I thought, what the hell, as much as I was resigned to leaving out so many chapters of way back when and there, a few pieces of odds and ends, and meanderings, might be worth sharing with the reader. I mean, if you've remained with me thus far, a little more can't really hurt. Now, can it?

As much as the introduction and prologue have given a little background as to this piece of work's *raison d'être*, there's just a little more to be added.

It was in 1977 when I arrived in London after a hiatus of seven years. I hadn't intended arriving for another couple of months but circumstances overtook me. Let me backtrack – come with me. I've reserved some extra seating.

It was 1976 and I'd just graduated with honours in psychology but with all my travel adventures during the years I'd taken off through my degree and studying law earlier, I hadn't been to Africa. By the time I was halfway through my final year of writing a couple inconsequential theses, the clarion call of the

Dark Continent was becoming louder. By September, I thought stuff it, I'll finish my studies and head to Africa. A job in psychology would have to wait (and wait it did for another four years).

It was all pretty clear to me what I'd be doing in 1977. I had booked a flight to Cape Town for May of that year to connect with a safari truck heading overland all the way to London. Then my friend and bacchanalian muse, Michael, called. Another party. A party, of all things! Just what I needed. He knew I wasn't a party animal but I did have a car and he liked to drink; symbiosis strikes again.

I was never one for excessive drinking and meaningless conversation (that came later down through the years. Well, not the drinking). I suspect he knew that he'd have to make up for my lack of enthusiasm for party shenanigans, a proclivity for which he was renowned. So, over to Five Dock we wandered. And there she was. And there I was. And I guess it follows, there we were. It was Jennie's party so, while she was busy doing whatever it is that hosts do, we exchanged poignant glances and very few words before, for reasons I still can't explain, I beat a hasty exit, alone, with nary a word of goodbye to anyone. Michael who?

I finished my degree in late November and was now basically homeless. I'd spent the previous year living in Wombarra, a beautiful seaside suburb about thirty minutes' drive north of Wollongong. It was now time to return to Sydney. I really had few options as to where I'd be living for the few months before I was Africa bound. Moving in with my parents for that brief time would have sufficed but had no real allure.

II – THE BEST LAID PLANS OF MICE AND KEN

Then Jennie made an offer I couldn't refuse. In early December I moved in with her (things had developed apace since September). Now, Jennie was born on the day my grandfather, the one I never knew, died. That was in April of 1950 and I hadn't quite turned one. At the time of his passing my parents and I were living in a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Bellevue Hill. Soon after I met Jennie at the party, she actually bought an apartment in Bellevue Hill of all places. Too make matters worse, it was that very same apartment that my parents had rented! This was getting spooky. I thought I'd better marry her before things got even more weird.

Apart from the fact that I found her ravishing and we began ravishing each other, she was the one, in the few months that I'd known her, with whom I'd had the most meaningful relationship in quite a while – well, I wasn't going to remain celibate until I met the girl of my dreams! We married in April. The only problem was, that I had a ticket to South Africa and had booked a spot on the safari truck.

So, on May 14, within weeks of taking our nuptials, off I flew. Neither of us was happy that I'd be leaving so soon, but I'd assiduously saved up for this trip for a quite a while and had actually paid for it. Living with Jennie and then, four months later, getting married, was not something I'd contemplated. I guess, since we were in love and didn't want to jeopardise not getting back together, marriage seemed like the best alternative to an uncertain future.

III – OFTEN GO AWRY

The plan was that, after my few months trekking through Africa, we'd meet in London in August and travel around Europe for a short time before heading overland to Australia across Asia and assume life as we thought it would transpire. Well, within a month, I was missing her more than I realised. By that stage I was in Nairobi and after a couple of long-distance calls, decided to abandon my African sojourn and fly to London where we would meet up earlier than planned before striking east.

Nairobi, at that time, was a relatively safe place to stay, even in the cheap side of the CBD where I found a room for a week before the next available flight. Besides, I don't think I presented a real target, dressed as I was in my travel garb of oldish-looking clothes and no jewellery. So I wandered the streets of Nairobi taking in the colours and smells of the local sights and markets, killing time until my flight was scheduled.

It may be Jomo Kenyatta International Airport now, but back in 1977 it was just a tin shed. There was a bus service that ran once a day to the airport and that was at 10.00 a.m. My flight, as luck would have it, was due to depart at eight that evening. No matter, I had a book and a pocket game of Mastermind which I'd picked up at a local market.

Well, the book I despatched within a short time so I turned to Mastermind. Ever tried playing Mastermind by yourself? This is how it goes: you place the counters randomly and then assign the black or white responses accordingly. Then you take a brisk walk for about thirty minutes and then, having forgotten the original combination, take to trying to work out the correct solution. Exciting eh? I managed to do that intermittently until early evening just as the

announcement came through that the plane was delayed; maybe closer to 10.00 p.m. they suggested. So back to the Mastermind and walking.

Fortunately, I'd bought some cheese and bread before leaving for the airport – fortunate because this international airport lacked any eating facilities. I had just returned to solids after a touch of food-poisoning I'd suffered in a game reserve just outside Nairobi. We always bought and cooked local produce and generally, we had no complaints, verbal or physiological. But a week ago I had both. I don't know what it was but it hit me with a vengeance.

We'd set up camp for the night, and rather than erect tents, most of us simply put our camp stretchers close to the fire on which we'd done our cooking. It must have been around midnight when it arrived. The others had long since hit their sleeping bags and all was quiet. Then a low rumbling could be heard; not by the others but just by me and it was a little disturbing. It suggested that I'd better get out my sleeping bag quickly and make a run for it. Not that there was anywhere in particular that one might run to – the idea was to get clear of the camp site. Well, ten metres was as much as I could manage before dropping my knickers (for that was all I was wearing) before all hell broke loose.

Under normal circumstances I would have had time to grab a shovel and some toilet paper, but these were not normal circumstances. Anyway, when all had settled down, I went back and retrieved those items and took care of business, so to speak. By that time, the last thing I felt like doing was crawling back into my sleeping bag and getting on with the night's sleep which was promising not to come easily. So I did what any idiot would do: I went for a walk in order to ease things up.

Now, walking in game reserves is not an advisable activity in daylight; even less advisable after sunset. Many carnivores, including the big cats, conduct their predations under the cover of darkness. I came to this realisation after about half an hour's stroll along an ill-defined track. My hot-footed return journey to my sleeping bag may have constituted an East African record.

So there I was in Nairobi airport killing time playing Mastermind and watching the locals as they arrived with all sorts of wondrous goodies, meats and breads and fruit, to tide them over. Delay after delay ensued until, just before 4.00 a.m., the announcement we'd all been waiting for: the plane had arrived and would be leaving within thirty minutes. The bodies moved as one to the gate. Actually, it should have been a starting gate for there were no allocated seats.

In the brief few moments we stood there, I quickly dropped a *mandy* knowing that, on a pretty empty stomach, it would deliver me into the arms of Morpheus within a short time of boarding. The gates opened and off we all

scurried. Now, as the reader may have noticed, I was no stranger to a sprint. I raced headlong at the front of what became the peloton, onto the craft and prostrated myself over three seats towards the rear of the plane and not far from the toilet. I was reluctant to take too many chances at this stage.

Luck was smiling on me; the flight was only half full and I retained my berth along with my continence. Now, of all the flights I've taken (there must be well over a hundred) I could count on the fingers of one foot (I have particularly long toes) the number of times I've actually attained a somniferous state. This was to be one. I woke up as the plane was touching down. It was cute how all the little Fiats were flashing around the tarmac as we taxied to a halt. Fiats, I thought, that's strange. Well, probably not so strange if destination was Rome.

I learnt that the plane had been suffering mechanical problems and had diverted to the Italian capital. So I lay there, still prostrated over my three seats fading in and out of my reverie before the aircraft resumed the final leg to London four long hours hence.

I continued to sleep sporadically for the next few hours before finally, we touched down. By this time, I was feeling rather ill. I took some consolation in the fact that my accommodation was taken care of. The parents of a flatmate of mine in Wombarra where I'd spent the previous year, were living in London and had offered their hospitality whenever I needed it. And now, more than ever, I really needed it.

I passed through customs feeling really wonky on my way to reclaiming my luggage. I was travelling with a largish backpack constructed of a metal frame, as they were in those days, around which fitted the canvas compartments. Fortunately, the compartments were intact which is more than I could say about the frame. Virtually every metal segment had been twisted and broken rendering the frame, and hence the entire back pack, useless. Evil had been at hand, I surmised. The only way I could carry the damned thing was in my outstretched hands. So that's what I did.

I can't imagine what I looked like floundering my way to the nearest tube station and then finally, to St. John's Wood where my hosts were living. So lucky I arrived when I did, they told me. They were leaving the next day for Scotland to watch The British Open. I was free to stay as long as I liked. By the next morning, I was feeling even more woeful but, nevertheless, summoned up my bonhomie and waved them a cheery farewell, before collapsing into the makeshift bed where I remained, virus-bound and medication free, for the next week. By that time, my affliction had passed, my hosts were returning, and Jennie's flight was within a day of arriving.

It was a strange reunion for us. I'd grown a beard since we were last in each other's arms and, at first, she didn't recognise me. She had that surrealistic feeling, she said, that she was meeting someone new and took a little while to get over the shock. We rented a little bed-sitter in Golders Green for a few weeks before heading off to the continent for a month or so before returning to London to strike east, overland, across Asia which we had originally planned before I left on my solo journey.

IV – ANOTHER SEED PLANTED

It was during my time in London that I turned on the TV and discovered David Attenborough's first series, *Life on Earth*. What a revelation! I was entranced as he gallivanted around the world seeking out and experiencing the wonders of Mother Nature. I knew I wanted to be David Attenborough when I grew up. Particularly wonderful, was the time he spent with the mountain gorillas in Rwanda.

Three years later, I was a single man again, and was back in Africa. I spent three months crossing The Sahara from north to south ending up in Togo, before taking a different route north and stopping in Timbuktu. That, of course, was a long way from Rwanda, but the dream remained alive over the next few years.

I then travelled from Egypt south into East Africa, but couldn't find my way to Rwanda on that trip either. The cost of visiting the gorillas was, even then, quite prohibitive, unless one joined a camping expedition in Tanzania. So that's what we did: Debbie and me. It was now late '83, seven years since Jennie and I had spent our time together. Debbie and I had been living together for just over a year and I'd prevailed on her to experience the gorillas with me. Despite her slim beauty, she was the consummate traveller and could rough it with the best.

So off we flew on our mission to see the Rwandan gorillas. We spent a few days exploring The Seychelles before touching down in Dar-es-Salaam just after midnight on that late December evening. Except for a few customs agents, the airport was devoid of activity barring the ubiquitous taxi drivers hovering voraciously around the exit. I don't know why, but I hadn't bothered to book accommodation, in the mistaken belief that it'd be easy to find given that I'd been to Dar twice before.

And all of a sudden, I couldn't remember a thing. Well, there was one hotel where I'd had cocktails a couple of times. Could it have been *The Excelsior*? I really don't remember. But since that was the only hotel I *could* recall at that time

and at that hour of the morning our choices weren't legion. Debbie, always the pragmatist, reminded me that our budget was such that to check into a 5-star could be ruinous to our budget.

But I smugly prevailed, telling her that I had a solution in mind - there's a lot to be said for hubris and overconfidence although this may not be the time. So, after a minimum of haggling with the taxi driver (he had us over a barrel and we all knew it), we found ourselves deposited at the palatial, only 5-star establishment in the country. Never mind that the place was suffering years of neglect, it far outshone anything else that was on offer.

On my previous two visits to Dar, we camped on beaches near the outskirts, venturing into town if desperation warranted it. And desperation rarely did so. I remember the very first time the driver of our truck and I visited the town centre. We needed to exchange money on the black market which was giving about seven times the official rate.

He knew of some Indian merchants who were only too happy to get their paws on some hard currency. That piece of fortuity had us dining like kings at the restaurants in the towns up the coast near where we'd encamped. I think that was my first encounter with lobster thermidor for which I'd parted with the best part of the equivalent of two dollars.

When I'd returned on another overland trip three years later, I alerted our group to the money-changing opportunities that I'd previously discovered. They had actually been prepared to exchange their dollars for the going bank rate but, after I'd prevailed on them to trust me with their lucre, I hightailed it to my Indian friends who were only too happy to give me ten to one, for that was now the new black-market rate. This made our stays in Tanzania incredibly cheap. On both these visits we even got to climb Kilimanjaro, with porters, for a pittance.

So it wasn't without some degree of confidence that knowing that, whatever the expense for a night's accommodation in the most expensive joint in town, it would be easily defrayed by a visit to the Indian part of town, a piece of information I'd omitted to inform Debbie the night before. We finally greeted the day towards the meridian before I left Debbie in order to make the exchange.

I thought I knew exactly where this place was but four years can be a long time. Well, do you think I could find the place? In my mind's eye I had a pretty good idea where it was and what it looked like. But four years is four years. I was wandering the streets alone, not dissimilar to a rhinestone cowboy. I don't know whether I was more scared of having fucked up our budget or Debbie's opprobrium upon learning of my misadventure. So, I kept walking, afraid to

return empty-handed. I ventured into a couple of Indian textile places hoping they would either change our money, or point me in the right direction. But nada (not sure how to say it in Hindi or Swahili).

I noticed some people walking in and out of a non-descript building and thought I'd investigate so I wandered inside. There were a lot of people milling about the counter but I had no idea what they were up to. I remained there for a few minutes cutting a pathetic figure, the only white in a sea of black. People were going about their business but I stood there, immobile. Eventually, one of the Indian contingent behind the counter spotted me and asked if he could be of assistance. "Well, er," I stumbled. "I think I might have been here a few years ago and someone helped me then."

He looked at me quizzically, before a hint of understanding graced his visage before he ushered me into a tiny office whereupon I explained the reason behind my visit. Well, to make a long story short, actually it's a bit too late for that, he accommodated my request and a generous exchange was transacted leaving him, me, and most importantly, Debbie, free to get on with the rest of our lives.

Enough of 5-star luxury. Two days later we joined our overland expedition en route across The Serengeti, up Kilimanjaro yet again, and into Rwanda to fulfil my dream of over a decade.

I remained in the village whilst Debbie and most of the rest of twenty-strong cohort embarked on their ascent of the mountain, just short of 20,000 feet high. I'd already been on Kili twice previously and, given that it was a particularly difficult trek, taking into account the altitude and all, had no desire to make another attempt.

So, I spent the next four days just hanging around the local area and doing nothing in particular (couldn't find a game of Mastermind anywhere). The poor buggers who attempted the climb were to encounter a blizzard just as they reached the saddle at about 13,000 feet and only a couple of them made the final ascent. On my second visit three years earlier, only one of eighteen failed to summit. Lucky me that I was there at the right time and unlucky Debbie, who under most circumstances, would have easily achieved the ascent.

We spent Christmas Eve camped in vastness of The Ngorogoro Crater. My internal workings were fine, obviating the need for a midnight stroll - no more walkin' after midnight for me. The crater is another of nature's marvels. It was formed when a large volcano exploded and collapsed on itself two to three million years ago, is 610 metres (2,000 feet) deep and its floor covers 260 square kilometres (100 square miles).

Someone had the festive idea to festoon the trunk of a rather large tree with toilet paper to evoke Christmas cheer. I think someone tried fruitlessly to incant a couple of Christmas carols before we all thought better of it and turned in, under the expansive branches of our yuletide arboretum. It almost worked.

V – GORILLA WELFARE

And then off to Rwanda. Two weeks later we encountered another group of travellers who had the misfortune to set up camp under that very same tree in the crater. One of the branches broke free and crushed a tent, killing one of the occupants and breaking the other's back. Timing is everything.

On New Year's Eve we encamped in the remains of a dilapidated hotel before the six-hour drive north to the Parc National Volcans in the foothills of the Virungas where the last remaining mountain gorillas roamed free.

We erected our tents near the park headquarters and prepared our evening meal in glorious expectation of the next couple of days. Glorious expectation indeed! The following morning, our driver returned from the offices, downcast, and informed us that our booking to spend time with the gorillas had been usurped by a group of Belgian VIPs who just happened to be in the country and who expressed a desire for adventure.

Well, jolly good for them. I'd just embarked on my fourth trip to the Dark Continent which was becoming even darker, and was now confronted with this, the cancellation of my reason for being here. I'd been to any number of animal reserves, paid homage to Kili as well as crossing the Sahara three times. This was all that was left for me to do before closing the door on Africa for good. (I did actually pay another visit when I went to Madagascar twenty years later, but that's another story that I'll relate at the end of this chapter, so don't go anywhere.)

The despondency in the camp was palpable running the gamut from mild disappointment to anger; I belonged to the latter group. A small delegation went to the headquarters to prevail upon the authorities but to no avail. The best they could do, they told us, was to go away and stay in contact with them and they would see what they could do. Not wishing to antagonise them, we did just that. The last thing we needed to do in this situation was to get them offside; that would mean an end to any hopes we had. My experience had shown me, that to get third-world officials offside was never something that was going to end well.

So off to the idyllic surrounds of Lake Kivu, a drive of ten hours south west with a lovely view of Zaire just across the water. Except for the pall that hung over us, this would be an ideal place to spend a few days. Once again, we set up our tents and retired early, not really given to any desire for communal interchanges. The following day our driver went to the town centre where he called the park authorities but the news wasn't good. Still no light at the end of our collective tunnel.

He tried again the next day and returned with better tidings: it was possible that a few people could visit in dribs and drabs over the next week. But no promises. So, what to do? We, all twenty-four of us assembled and it was decided that we'd draw lots and return to Virunga and just hope all would work out. Debbie's name came out sixth so she was looking good. I waited and waited until finally my name was called – position number eighteen. Thrilled, I wasn't. Depressingly disappointed, I was. Then the lovely Debbie, magnanimous creature that she was and still is, I might add (there's a chance that she might read this), insisted that we swap places. After all, everything she'd experienced thus far on our trip had been new to her and she knew how much I'd been wanting to see the gorillas. It probably meant that she wouldn't have to look at the photo of David Attenborough which I stuck to the wall near my bed (I made that part up). What could I do? She insisted and I put on a pretence to reluctantly accept.

We were back at park headquarters the following day in high anticipation of what was to follow. We assumed camp life just hanging around with nothing much to do while, over the next four days, we all managed to spend the allocated time with those magnificent creatures. We even managed, some of us including me, to get a second bite. Apart from the obvious joy in spending time with the gorillas, two things, for some reason, came back to me years later in my reminiscences.

First, there was this German guy called Wolfgang. Really! If you had to choose a name for a German, then how much better could you go? He was a dour, humourless character who, despite having a reasonable grasp of our lingua franca, English, was rather gauche (in a Germanic way), and seemed to have had a charisma bypass. Anyway, poor old Wolfie didn't quite fit in with our cosmopolitan little group. We were represented by six different nationalities.

Now, our Teutonic companion was widely rumoured to have an aversion to water, an affliction, as time went by, which was manifestly evident within a radius of a couple of metres. Needless to say, his company was never highly sought after. Even his unfortunate tent mate, was noticeably not in close propinquity to him in the waking hours. Efforts were made, but to no avail, to encourage him to engage in the merest of ablutions. It was a little irritating since there were

times when travelling in enclosed spaces, certain characteristics became more noticeable than others.

I don't know who had the idea, it wasn't me this time, but there were chickens running loose in our compound. One of the troops caught one and zipped it into Wolfie's tent while he was absent. When he returned, he entered the tent without realising the skulduggery that was afoot. The ensuing five minutes or so, while the tent assumed all kinds of weird shapes and sounds, was something that reduced us to paroxysms of uncontrollable laughter. I'm so glad Wolfie was on our trip.

The second happenstance that comes back to me through the years concerned the gorillas. Of course, the gorillas stand head and shoulders, metaphorically and literally, above anything else that presented itself. There was a fellow, Peter, on our trip who hailed from Cornell University in New York.

Now, if our European *freund* hadn't been there, then Peter would probably had worn the mantle of 'weirdest on trip' for reasons best left unexamined here, although I did ponder just what might have been in his video collection back home. Peter had gone up into the mountains with us on day two of our gorilla experience, but on day five, he departed with a couple of porters and returned a few hours later. Nothing was said about this mysterious exercise until he showed me, the next day, a large specimen jar with a gorilla foetus inside. He'd actually been to see Dian Fossey in her mountain cabin. She had entrusted him with the foetus to take back to Cornell to try and ascertain why so many females had been spontaneously aborting.

No further information came to hand. I don't know why he confided that piece of information with me since we didn't really have much to say to each other during our six weeks of travelling. And, of course, we all know the tragic fate that befell Ms Fossey just two years later.

IV - A COINCIDENCE OR TWO OR THREE OR MORE CLASS OF '32

Well, I've mentioned, earlier, the coincidences of running into Alan Jacobs in Luxor after a hiatus of almost two decades, and being reacquainted with Michael O. in Sydney after not having seen him since South America five years prior. But wait, there's more!

I was in Turkmenistan in 2005; the sun hadn't greeted the day, but that's irrelevant. I had decided it was a good time to visit the "Stans", Kyrgyz-, Tajiki-,

Uzbeki-, Turkmeni- and Kazahk-, the five I hadn't yet explored. I was travelling with a group of educated and senior companions whose average age must have been close to mine in the mid-50s.

I took a particular liking to an elderly couple who must have been just shy of eighty. They were both retired dentists who were living in, what is commonly referred to as the "Shire", a relatively affluent and salubrious collection of southern suburbs of coastal Sydney. When I told Ral, that I was from Bondi and working as a teacher at Bronte Public School, his eyes lit up. He went on to tell me of his childhood growing up just down the street from the school and of his time when he was one of the first batch of students attending that institution which had opened in 1925.

Over the next few weeks he was keen to regale me of the times he spent at the school and give me a wonderful perspective about those times, three-quarters of a century ago. He and his wife were wonderful company. And now, this is where it gets really spooky. (I'm given to spookiness).

A few months after returning to Sydney, a grandparents' day was held in the school as it is every year. I had a lovely student in my class by the name of Daniel. Daniel brought his mother and grandfather along to class to spend a little time with him in his school setting. Anyway, I'm chatting with the grandfather, can't remember his name, and he tells me of his time growing up in Bronte.

"So, what school did you attend," I inquired.

"Bronte," he chirped.

"And when was that?" I further inquired.

"My first year was way back in 1932," he continued.

"Well, that's a coincidence," I remarked with a quiet sense of foreboding. "I met a fellow, a couple of months ago and he also attending Bronte around the same time."

"Who was that?" he asked. "Maybe I knew him."

Knew him indeed! They were best mates all through school. They hadn't seen each other for decades, but this amazing coincidence led them to reacquaint after all those years apart. Now, that's a happy ending to please everyone.

But I can't help but think that if I didn't involve a couple of people in unlikely conversations, then I could have spared the reader a couple of pages. But seriously, how wonderful to have been part of an experience that came about so serendipitously.

V – TENDRILS.

ALLAN – AN AUSTRALIAN TRAGEDY

Allan joined Debbie and me in Athens in April 1982. I can't remember where we planned to go to with him. He'd left Australia a month before with Keva, one of our Dip. Ed. friends and had spent some time with her in Asia before they intended meeting us in Greece. Keva had a change of heart and headed back home leaving Allan to join us alone. DipEd., incidentally, refers to the Diploma in Education that was required as a post-graduate course until 2017 to qualify as a teacher. It took us a year to complete but, in reality, and for all the use it was, it could've been laid to rest in a couple of months. Still, it was a fun year, one that impacted socially and professionally for the rest of my life.

Debbie and I had arrived in Athens circuitously having crossed Siberia in the heart of winter before spending some time, together and separately, in England before travelling together via Ireland, France, and hugging the Mediterranean coast to Greece.

We'd all met at Sydney Uni, a bunch of misfits of average age of about thirty, who drifted into the idea of assuming teaching. Allan, I seem to recall, had a degree in economics, Debbie had majored in languages and something else at ANU in Canberra and had been working in the public service, and I, who had studied law prior to becoming a psychologist, all spent a great deal of time together during our Dip. Ed. year.

Allan, at mid-thirties, was a couple of years my senior and had been separated from his wife for just over a year and was at a loose end professionally. He still saw his two teenage boys regularly. During our time at Teachers' College he'd been dating Judy, an amazing singer who, likewise was separated from her husband. She had a young son, Thane. Judy was also studying education.

So there we were in Athens, not sure where to wander next. We did a bit of sightseeing in southern Greece before heading to Turkey for a month or so. Debbie had planned to go to Israel and work on a kibbutz. Allan and I were not sure as to where we'd head. I found an excursion in North-West Africa which would take us from Tunisia south across the Sahara to Togo and then north again, this time by a different route, back to Tunisia. Looked exciting. The minor problem was that we needed visas for a number of these countries and they were only available in Paris; ex-French-West Africa still had diplomatic representation only in Paris.

One of us needed to take a cheap non-stop bus to Paris (29 hours away) and acquire these visas. We tossed and, fortunately for me, the coin fell my way, and

Allan was off along with my passport, to Paris. I never, for a minute, considered it was a trifle foolish to be wandering around minus a passport. Nevertheless, no harm befell me. Debbie and I caught a ferry to Icarus for a couple of days and returned to Athens expecting to see Allan with the visas before Debbie and I parted company. And there was Allan but no visas.

On the long overnight trip, he'd decided that the best thing for him was to return to Australia and try and reconcile with Vicky and his children. So back to Australia he went. Debbie headed off to Israel to work on a kibbutz, and I flew to New York before catching the train to Canada and across that continent to Vancouver with a couple of weird stops and encounters along the way.

Three months later I too, returned to Australia and caught the Indian-Pacific train from Sydney to Perth in order to complete a circumnavigation of the planet by train. Debbie returned soon after and six months after that, I'd persuaded her to accompany me to Tunisia to do the African thing that Allan and I had been contemplating.

So no big deal. Life proceeded *comme d'habitude*. Allan re-established himself as a family guy while Debbie and I, after a few months, moved into together and the rest is mystery. We saw Allan, Vicky and the two boys regularly and the three novice teachers began working around the traps as substitute teachers (Vicky was already a teacher of longstanding). I landed a nine-month stint at Bronte Public School. It almost goes without saying that one of my students was Thane, Judy's son. Twenty-five years later I found myself back at Bronte teaching Thane's daughter Zoe, a lovely child in her own right. Another strange twist of the tendril.

And now it gets a little weird and very tragic. Debbie and I continued to travel when we could, venturing that year to East Africa to visit the mountain gorillas and the following year to South America for three months. Allan and Vicky and the boys, Kieran and Nathan, enjoyed newfound family life as much as one might enjoy that.

At the end of the following year, 1985, Allan returned to France, this time with his family for six weeks on a once-in-a-lifetime trip, while Debbie and I found ourselves, this time, in South-East Asia, travelling from Burma down the Malay Peninsula to Singapore.

We returned in time to begin the new academic year. Arriving at Sydney Airport and ready to catch local transport home, I noticed my parents waiting at arrivals. They hadn't done this for many years so it was indeed, a pleasant surprise. Pleasant indeed. We chatted idly and bromidically, something at which my parents and I had accomplished quite well over the years.

We deposited our luggage in the boot and headed off for home. My mother turned and gave me a small cutting from a newspaper. The heading was “Three Aussies killed in Paris car crash.” I don’t know who was driving, but apparently, they’d gone through a stop sign on the Paris outskirts and had been collected a heavy truck. Kieran was the sole survivor and had been taken to a hospital in Paris with serious injuries. Debbie and I sat stunned and crying quietly in disbelief, comforting each other all the way home.

I think now, even thirty years later, the whole episode still seems surreal. When a physically patched-up Kieran, now aged fifteen, returned to Sydney a few months later, a memorial service was held at a local Catholic school where Allan had been working. Who knows what psychological damage Kieran had incurred. His aunt, who lived in Sydney’s inner west, took him into her guardianship and that was the last we heard from him. Or so we thought. I’d just been assigned a permanent teaching job at Camperdown.

Two years later, during parent-teacher interviews, I was chatting to Carol, Fern’s mother, and somehow we stumbled onto the revelation that it was she, Vicky’s sister, who was now Kieran’s guardian! What were the chances? We saw him from time to time but soon lost contact. Before losing contact I’d ask about his well-being, but given his still tender years as well as the residual damage from his trauma, his responses were pretty monosyllabic. Well, our lost contact with him was only for a few years anyway. One of my friends, Cath, with whom I regularly swim, was telling me about her neighbour in Bondi and it didn’t take long for me to realise that here was Kieran yet again.

He’d married, and along with his stepdaughter, had two girls of his own. He had, in fact, married the mother of one of my daughter’s ballet companions. We’d run into him for time to time at ballet concerts but rarely after that.

I’d met Cath whilst I was teaching at Bronte as mentioned above. She had the class next door. We used to swap kids for reading and maths groups so I got to know her students quite well also. One of her kids, a lovely child, I used to see walking home from school even into the following year when I was working elsewhere. She recognised my car and always gave a cheerful wave. Then I saw her no more. No one did. Ever. Her name was Samantha Knight.

So there you have it. The tendrils of coincidences always and unpredictably intertwining.

VI – TO ASK OR NOT TO ASK

And now, finally, getting to the last coincidence of this volume. Of course, it would be easy to talk about the time I started dating Yvonne as I turned twenty, and on showing me her family album, there she was standing next to me in our kindergarten photo sixteen years earlier.

Or the time I was travelling hundreds of kilometres north of Sydney by myself to Queensland to meet an old flame, when I got into a conversation with the service station proprietor and discovered that thirty years earlier, his wife and he had been living in Sydney and that Anne, his wife, had been good friends with my mother. And so on it goes.

Unless we take time to ask questions of people in the course of being sociable or inquisitive, we pass on to the next brief, empty social encounter. And, let’s face it, sometimes that is more than sufficient. But sometimes one needs a little extra. Just to briefly anchor in a time shared or a time significant.

And finally, which was going to be dealt with a paragraph ago, this. When I was working, carrying food from stall to stall at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 1972 during the Ashes series, I became engaged in a conversation with another uni student such as I, who was doing odd jobs whilst on uni vacation.

His name was Owen Griffith (I can give his full name, I’m not about to traduce his character). He was a pleasant fellow who I only ever knew for a week or so, but we discussed our post-uni plans. He wanted to go to Botswana to study snails (he wasn’t planning on being an accountant) and I simply wanted to take another year off from my studies and see Africa from top to bottom, stopping, of course, in Botswana. It took me another eight years to do that.

Anyway, Owen and I had some interesting exchanges about Africa among other things. At the end of that week, our jobs had finished and we went our separate ways. I thought of him from time to time over the years, wondering whether he achieved his dream, but since there was no way of finding out, I let that encounter reside in a far recess of my memories.

Now, switch to 2005, thirty-three years after meeting him. I was travelling, in Madagascar with a small group and stopped for lunch with one of my co-travellers, in a small roadside café in the centre of the country. A young fellow, I estimated to be in his mid-to-late- twenties, approached us and asked, upon overhearing our accents, if he could join us. Why not, we both responded and down he sat.

He asked our names and then told us his name was Owen from Australia and he'd been working in, of all places, Botswana. Coincidence, I remarked, explaining that the only other person with whom I'd had a chat about Botswana, was also named Owen. We enjoyed our light meal and then parted company.

Now, that should have been that. But it wasn't. A week later we were in southern Madagascar and lunching in a lemur reserve. I'm talking to my three companions but becoming a little unsettled by the conversation at the very next table. It would have been easy to focus on our repartee but impulse took hold of me and I turned to one of the guys at the next table and said, "Excuse me. Are you by any chance Owen Griffith?" Well, you could have knocked both of us over with a sledge hammer. 'Twas he!

I recounted, to him, our brief time together back in Sydney working at the sports ground. But the bastard couldn't remember me! He'd left Sydney within a few years of our first encounter and had, indeed gone to Botswana to pursue his dream. He was now, however, living in Mauritius where, if I recall correctly, he had established the largest turtle or tortoise breeding centre in the southern hemisphere. We chatted for a few minutes before I, once again, retreated into the fogginess of his obscurity.

So what were the chances? A guy who I'd been acquainted with for about a week, over three decades ago and hadn't seen since; a guy who wasn't living in Australia anymore; a guy who just happened to be enjoying a brief holiday in Madagascar when I was there; a guy who just happened to be eating in a backwater restaurant at a table next to mine; my overhearing something in their conversation that gave me pause; my asking the question, because if I don't, the whole coincidence doesn't draw breath.

Once upon a time I used to be a betting man. Not anymore. What odds that this could happen? What are the odds of anything happening? And if you're not out there, exploring the world and asking questions, then nothing happens. Regularly. Don't mind that the universe doesn't blink. It really is an amazing world! It really is worth a visit.



***YOU HAVE
ALREADY DONE***

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken was born on June 27, 1949 at Waverley's War Memorial Hospital in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs. He attended Rose Bay Public School and later Vacluse Boys High, matriculating in 1967. He studied Arts and Law at UNSW and Sydney University before relocating to Wollongong where he graduated with honours in Psychology.

Except for the five or so years he spent travelling, he has lived most of his life around the seaside suburbs of Bondi and Bronte. He is/was a keen sportsman having been his school's athletic champion and played competition tennis, golf and squash as well as representing New South Wales in water polo over a number of years. These days Ken can be seen at Bondi Beach around daybreak where he undertakes his morning walks as well as his swims, year-round, across the bay.

He is an avid reader and a lifelong learner. Ken was a TV quiz champion in the '80s and conducted trivia nights at pubs and corporate events over many years.

In his mid-30s he undertook a change of career and completed a Dip. Ed. It was during that year that he met his wife, Debbie who was also seeking a change of career. Ken has been teaching now for thirty-five years, the last thirty at Bronte Public School where, at age 71, he still teaches part time specialising in gifted and talented education.

Debbie has been working as a school principal and deputy principal, and their daughters, Kate and Amy, have followed in their parents' footsteps and likewise embarked in teaching careers.

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A poignant, insightful and very funny travel blog from the era of the 70s and 80s when Australians set off with their backpacks to see the world. Ken Brandon takes the reader across multiple continents in search of a decent meal and a good night's sleep. A straightforward objective but travelling companions, language difficulties, a shoestring budget and gastrointestinal problems always seem to present challenges.

All of the wanderings, pestilence and misadventures of the Bible but much more amusing and a shorter and easier read. Highly recommended.

Trevor Danos