



The New Richmond Reader

August 2012



Your Literary News from the Heart of the Karoo

The snows have come and gone and come yet again in this most bitter of winters in the Karoo. There is heat radiating from the Aga for the fortunate but there are the cold winds which penetrate the plastic and cardboard shacks and the thread bare clothes of the Karoo outcasts. Meanwhile those at the top revel in the construction of their private fiefdoms to their vain glory like some warrior king in our not so distant past.

Winter is the season that takes away our old friends and makes us survivors realize just how fortunate we are to make it into the spring which lies only a few months away. Time, endless time marches on.



Vegkop in the dead of winter

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it*

We hope that you enjoy this 6th edition of the NRR and look forward to your submissions and comments.

I recently undertook a marvellous safari into the hinterlands of Mother Africa and have included in this NRR an excerpt of my chronicle and I do hope that you enjoy it.

Remember that BookBedonnerd is only around the corner, the Karoo will be buzzing and warm. Book your accommodation early to avoid disappointment. It promises to be a humdinger!

PC Baker

My New Office

By Robin Whales

I had offices on the top floor of Commercial Centre in Loveday Street, between Main and Marshall, with a view of Jozi's mine dumps between straight-edged office blocks. It was an old building and the rooms came at low rental.

I took three and had my name printed in black caps on the glass panel of each door. RSV WILLSON ASSOCIATED – FINANCIAL CONSULTANT. I was doing all right. Not wonderful, but all right.

My wife Judy worked half-days for me. I dropped her off before going to parking, and she caught a bus home at twelve-thirty so she could be there when Simon and Louise cycled home from high school. She insisted on that. A friend who worked mornings only at Felix Insurance around the corner, where I had sold life assurance before taking the plunge a few months ago, did phone duty for me in the afternoons.

If I was out Judy kept the doors locked and when she left she set the answering service. There was sometimes an hour when my business was empty but my tiny, tough wife refused to stay longer. She was quite a woman.

I used to park in the cavernous space under the M2 highway, which had been converted to paid parking. I got to know the attendant, John, a neatly uniformed Zulu. If I arrived mid-morning after an appointment I would park and wave to him and call out: "Only five minutes, John. OK?" and he nodded. When I did that first thing some mornings he just stared at me.

Every few weeks I slipped twenty or thirty rands under the wire grate of his cubicle and winked at him. I had only seen him smile once, when I did an eight-step mine-boot dance, and then it looked as if he was only being polite.

On the noisy, windy corner of Loveday and Village Road opposite the parking, the miserable jobless, and probably homeless, gathered for their lift after a day of begging and hunting for food. Every day I passed fifteen or twenty of these abandoned beings, oblivious of the world passing them by. They didn't look up, just

kept leaning against the huge concrete column holding up the Rissik Street off-ramp, or shuffling about, sharing a cigarette or a bottle, mumbling, sometimes arguing and screeching. There were men and women, thirty to sixty years old. Who could tell? Eyes and mouths slits in lumpy dough. No eyelashes or teeth. I once saw a bent figure relieving himself against the concrete.

Their leader in jacket and tie and tweed cap herded them onto a bakkie at the end of their day. He caught my eye one evening and smiled and I nodded. That was all he needed to walk with me to the kerb.

"How are you, Sir?" His short legs stretched to match mine stride for stride in a panting swagger. He had a small moustache and his lifeless, red eyes stared at me, sizing me up. I couldn't be sure if he was African or coloured.

"Well, thank you. And how are you?"

"Not too bad." He spoke better than he looked. "I see Sir walk past by every day. Very fast." He smiled, still watching me closely.

"I prefer to walk fast."

"I can observe Sir is a clever man, very much busy."

"Yes, I'm busy. Walking keeps you fit." Up close he reeked of cheap tobacco and urine. "You should take it up."

"Yes, Sir." He didn't understand.

"Here you are." I took out the coins I had handy for a newspaper and gave them to him.

"Thank you, Sir." He stopped and raised a finger. "I can rest assure I will look after Sir."

We shook hands, commonplace these days. I turned to see him stop and take a look at the money in his cupped hand. Perhaps he would save me from a mugging. In the parking lot I wiped my hand on the floor mat of my car.

I played squash twice a week and popped into the main bar at Northcliff Country Club regularly.

Circulate. That's what it was all about. Ben, my boozy old sales boss and good friend at Felix, once said all fifty men at the bar counter were potential clients. That really sunk in. Prospects, we call them. The guy you greet and the ones with him might talk: "Who's that?" "Rod Willson. Insurance. Rather assurance, he insists." "He might be useful."

There was a cricket guy called Digby Jansen I wanted to get to know better. His business had shot up and I had already asked Ben to draw up a proposal for a Felix new-business plan for him. I went to Assure Life and Premier Inc as well for proposals.

There was something about dealing with people from the same club, especially an upmarket one like North-cliff. I had picked up five clients there, and one or two were young family guys, sure to be long term. I kept my eyes open for newcomers and worked in a greeting but made a point of appearing to be a loner. "Is he really in insurance?" I had heard that mumbled more than once. I also made sure the barmen knew what I did so they could be stringers.

Other stringers were the attractive Alison at the jeweller's in Greenside, where I had bought the kids' watches and Judy's fresh-water pearl necklace, and the bookstore owner. Even the Portuguese veggies guy, who had taken a R300 a month RA, could be useful. He had been easy. I offered stringers R200 and up for a lead, depending on the eventual contract. Always pay, Ben had said. Trust was the cornerstone of our profession.

Every time I saw the tweed-capped leader of the jobless group, his name was Sonny, he joined me on my way to parking. I had stopped slipping him a coin and shaking hands each time but he remained polite and cheerful. One evening it occurred to me that I could pay him for cleaning my car. In fact, I smiled at the thought, if he cleaned mine he could clean others. Have his own small business.

That evening I brought up the idea at supper. Judy and Louise were excited about it, especially Louise who said her teacher was always talking about that sort of thing. We discussed it and Simon drew up a list of things for me and them to do: permission, water source and container, cleaning liquid, utensils (and storage of), overalls or coat, letter of introduction,

book to keep a record.

When I mentioned the idea to Sonny, he nodded vaguely, but when I dropped in thirty rand a car his face lit up. He stared at me and a smile broke through showing gaps among his chipped, green teeth.

"I can charge thirty bucks for cleaning his car?"

"Yes, if you do it properly."

"I can do my uttermost best." He gazed ahead. Cars and rattling trucks sped past and the highway above was humming.

"If you do a good job they will pay even forty rands." I pointed to the car park. "Look at all your customers."

"I can buy a car," he said.

"If you work hard every day and save your money. You could give your friends work." He swivelled round and ran back to his rabble.

I spoke to John about allowing Sonny in to clean cars. He phoned his boss who said yes provided he keeps a close check on Sonny and gives my name and telephone number. The garage across the road from Sonny's corner gave permission for him to fill the bucket with water. They warned that if there was any trouble he'd be out.

Judy and I decided to hold back on a full bottle of cleaning fluid until Sonny had proved himself, and instead poured some into a cold-drink bottle. We found an old plastics bucket and collected a bunch of clean rags and a yellow duster. Judy had an old blue maid's coat, and I wrote the "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN" letter explaining that car-park management had approved Sonny's cleaning service, and suggested a fee of thirty rands. Furthermore, he would be working under John's supervision, meaning head office supervision, which sounded impressive. That was not strictly true but John had been instructed to keep an eye on Sonny.

Judy came up with the idea of using Post-it notes, a regular promotion from our computer supplies company, for Sonny to write the car registration numbers and his fee and attach it to the windscreen. Her station-

keep a record of payment in one of my son's school exercise books.

Almost daily I had told Sonny to be patient and when the day arrived for me to hand over he came with me to the car to collect everything. He kept glancing over his shoulder on the way to the car park.

"You all right, Sonny?" I said

"I can miss my drive, Sir."

"This won't take long. What time is your lift?" They were often still there long after six.

"Any time, Sir."

I introduced him to John and they mumbled greetings. I could see John didn't like him. By the time we reached my car Sonny had become extremely agitated.

"I must go, Sir." He touched his cap and retreated out of the car park and I saw him running to the corner.

I decided to come earlier the following day and have a talk with Sonny, but it was a week before I was able to tell my family that the connection had been made. He had joined me walking and I told him to wait on his corner while I fetched the kit. I had arranged for John to keep the bucket of utensils in his cubicle and I explained to Sonny that he could pick it up any time. He looked at the bucket and its contents as I spoke. I handed it to him.

"If Sir will give it to that man." He pointed to John.

"That's fine, Sonny. Come early so you can speak to the people when they arrive and show them my letter. Wash you hands and face, hey! Stand up straight, and smile."

"Yes, Sir." He stood stiffly to attention.

Suddenly, I was feeling good about myself doing good, and I dropped in a word here and there at the club about my project with Sonny. It would get around.

I also had four big dead-sure policy proposals to convert plus another three possibles, and had a game of squash with Digby Jansen, the guy with the growing

business. I won and he suggested we meet again for his revenge. The way things were going Judy would be able to stop working sooner than expected and devote more time to the kids, which she dearly wanted, and I could move to better offices. There was a new block in Northcliff offering furnished, serviced rooms and shared office assistants. The building was close to a nicer house we were looking at in Northcliff. I was also hoping Judy would soon have a new car.

On the way home that evening I popped into the jeweller's in Greenside to look for a present for Judy. She loved surprises. It was well after six when I tapped on the glass door. Inside, Alison put her hands against the glass in front of my eyes.

"We're closed so go away you horrible man. Or I'll scream." She took her hands away and tilted her head to the side. She had a cheeky smile.

"I'll pop in tomorrow."

"Ooowee, I look forward to that." What a character she was. That sweet, singsong voice.

I waited until Saturday when we were taking the kids to the school fete. I dropped them off and told Judy I had something to do in Greenside and would be back in half an hour.

"How nice to see you again," Alison said.

"Yes, you too. I'm looking for a gift. A bracelet, I think."

"How about a chunky copper and beads one, like these?"

"That's nice."

"Any special colour? Or mixed?"

"I don't actually know."

"You could find out by asking what her favourite gemstones are and match the colours. It's for your wife?" That smile again.

"Yes."

"I know she likes greens and browns."

"I'd better find out." I made for the door.

"Won't you have a cup of tea with me before you go?"

"Thank you. Coffee, if that's all right." With me, she had said.

A couple of times I made for the door but she motioned me back. I stayed for an hour and a half and had two cups and carrot cake. She was a local girl, thirty-three, rinsed her hair for blond highlights, had lovely eyes but wore contacts for an astigmatism, her husband was a bank manager and she had no children. The storeowner allowed her to sell her own jewellery designs and the copper bracelet was one of them. She offered to bring in a bigger selection.

I had evening appointments the following Monday and Tuesday, one running to eight o'clock, and on Wednesday afternoon Alison phoned to tell me she had more bracelets to show me..

In the car park after work that day John told me that Sonny had not picked up the cleaning kit. My children were disappointed so I decided on a new strategy. At four-thirty on Thursday I waited on his corner and when he appeared I walked up to him and said: "Come with me, Sonny."

"Hullo, Sir," he said, cheerful as always, and followed me.

At John's cubicle I took out the bucket and held it in front of Sonny.

"Take it," I said firmly.

He did so and it swung from his shaking hand. I wondered if he had ever held one.

"Take everything out."

He removed the coat, bottle, newspaper, cloths, envelope and Post-it notes and placed them at his feet. When they were all out he took another look and felt inside the bucket.

"I want you to wash my car, Sonny."

"Yes, Sir." He stared at me, thinking hard, and glanced at his corner. "The day after, Sir?"

"Yes, tomorrow. I will pay you."

"Thank you, Sir. I will do a sterling piece of job."

"If you do, I will give you thirty rands. Maybe more."

"Yes, Sir."

"Where will you get water?"

"By the Shell, sir."

"Good man. Mr Pieterse knows all about it so there won't be a problem. Do you want to take the bucket home or leave it with John?"

"I will leave it with this man." John was watching us.

"All right, run for your lift."

When I parked the next morning John told me Sonny had come in to say he would clean my car later and take the bucket then.

Judy and I were busy that day processing the paperwork for new policy conversions, one a five-million rand endowment for Digby Jansen's wife. Boozy Ben at Felix worked on that for me. He needed the commission. I pictured his hands shaking as he phoned head office and raked through his catalogues. It was a pity Assure Life had offered me a better commission than Ben could for Digby's business plan, one of my biggest potential successes so far. Ben's was actually a better plan.

That afternoon I telephoned Alison. She had copper bracelets with beads which matched tiger's eye, Judy's favourite gemstone I'd found out, and she agreed to wait after six.

It had been a hectic day and I hadn't given Sonny a thought. On my way to the car park I saw him looking at me, eyes just visible under the peak of his cap, and I waved him over.

"How is Sir today?"

"All right, Sonny. How did it go with my car?"

"I washed Sir's car."

"How long did it take you?"

"One hour or so on."

"Well done. You could do four or five cars a day. Come, let's have a look."

"Please, Sir, it is late. My drive is coming now now."

"All right. I am pleased you have started, Sonny. Keep it up, hey."

I knew I had to pay him as agreed. I wanted to see my car first but I also had to instil trust. That was my duty. I checked my cash and found I only had hundreds. I sighed and looked at him.

"Here you are, Sonny, one hundred rands. You owe me seventy, but I'll make it sixty. Not every time, though. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir. I will make change."

"I want it tomorrow. Sixty rands."

"Yes, Sir."

"Tomorrow!" I smiled.

"On my mother's coffin, Sir. I promise."

He took the note, looking me straight in the eye, and I felt we had an understanding. There was a bond. But I was not happy with my car. There were curved stripes of dried cleaning fluid on the bonnet and boot and tiny rings where bubbles had burst. I gave it a quick rub. I would have to speak to Sonny. Some guy in uniform was talking to John in his cubicle on my way out, so I paid this time.

It was close to seven o'clock when I got to Greenside. The security guards were on parade and a busy armed-response car was racing about. Alison was still there. She had found a satin-lined box for Judy's bracelet so I bought three in different colours. We chatted easily for a while and I was late getting home. Judy was pleased

with the gift but was so busy with the kids' dinner that she did not have time for a close look. She was very strict with the children, with everything.

After we had cleared the table she put the bracelets on and examined them closely, holding her arm to the light.

"They are lovely. Thank you."

"I thought you would like them."

"Where did you get them?"

I hesitated. "At the Arcade in town." She was silent and didn't turn round to look at me. Nor did she wear the bracelets for some time.

I didn't see Sonny for a few days and John said he hadn't been in again for the bucket. One evening he was with his group and he walked with me to the kerb.

"Good evening, Sir. How is Sir today?"

"Have you got my sixty rands yet, Sonny?" He had the helpless look he had shown when he held the bucket.

"I want the money. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Tomorrow." He didn't reply.

After that whenever Sonny saw me approaching he would scream at the top of his voice at his rabble to get out of my way. He didn't look at me, I supposed until I had passed him. Once he attempted to walk with me, smiling and cheerful, but I ignored him and strode ahead.

I knew I would never get the money. It was the principle not the money, but it was a relief in a way. I wasn't cut out for this development business, too busy, and I would be out of here soon. To Northcliff, with parking and closer to the jeweller's, and that pretty little project, or should I say prospect, turned out well for a while.

It was only years later that Judy told me she had seen the copper bracelets in Alison's shop. She had stayed

with me because of the children, but now she was leaving.

End

Maeve's Story

by Keith britz

Maeve sat opposite me her tea untouched. We had been friends ever since she and her young family moved into town some twenty years ago. I think it is fair to say that I am her only close friend. She was a kind yet distant person. One always felt there were depths in her that would always remain untouched. Yet when I had my hysterectomy she was the one who took me the eighty miles to the hospital. She was the one who visited me twice during my stay there and who brought me home.

She had just returned from Grahamstown after the funeral of her stepfather. I must say that I was surprised to hear that she had a stepfather as she had never spoken of him. I knew her mother lived in Port Elizabeth and that she had a sister and brother there whom they visited every Christmas. So to find out that there was a stepfather who had died rather puzzled me. I wondered why she had never mentioned him – ever.

I sipped my tea. I wanted to speak but I felt I had to wait until she was ready. I thought it strange when I received a telephone call from her late this afternoon asking me to come over. She didn't sound anything like herself. It was as if her thoughts were somewhere else. I was intrigued. The call itself was strange because we had slipped into a routine of visits. Three times a week she would come for lunch when the business she worked in closed between one and two o'clock.

"I hate funerals." Maeve said and then sighed, "And especially this one." She was silent for a while then said almost to herself, "So many memories."

"Memories?"

"Yes. Not happy ones at that." Again she fell silent.

"Painful. The funeral brought back feelings and thoughts I would rather not remember. I have tried so hard to forget. But it made me confront an episode in my life. And the memory of it still haunts me. How I wished things were different."

"Oh, come on. I'm sure it is not that bad."

"Oh, come on. I'm sure it is not that bad."

"Well I have lived with guilt of it all my life. I felt so responsible for my mother's loss. I have often wondered if I had only been stronger, things might have turned out differently."

She sat there her eyes seemed to be focused on something deep within her. I began to feel uncomfortable.

"Let me make you another cup. Your tea has gone cold." I said to break the silence. She nodded.

In the kitchen I stood wondering what it could be that so affected her. The kettle boiled and I made us a fresh pot of tea. All the while wondering how she could have been responsible for a loss her mother had experienced. I knew that ever since she left school and began to work she had sent her mother money every month. I had assumed that it was because her mother received a state disability pension. Could Maude's regular contribution be a clue? I didn't know. Now I wasn't so sure of the conclusion I had jumped to.

I set the tray again and took it through to the living room. She looked up at me and gave me that hesitant, insecure smile that was, one could almost say, her trademark.

"Forgive me. My thoughts are so muddled. Let me start at the beginning. My father died in the '18 flu epidemic. I was just two years old and my brother a newly born. I don't remember him or his death. But a few years later my mother remarried. An accountant and from what I have heard a brilliant one." She sipped her tea, then distractedly stirred it again and once more sipped at it.

"My earliest memory of my stepfather was waking one night to the sound of a man's raised voice and crockery being broken. My stepsisters also woke at the sound and started crying. I got up and tried to calm them. By then the man's voice had reached screaming pitch. But they would not be quieted so I picked the youngest one up and went to look for my mother. I found her in the kitchen and my stepfather pacing in front of the stove. Each time he passed the kitchen dresser he picked up a plate and smashed it on the floor. I ran to my mother and pushed the baby into her arms and fled the kitchen, picked the older child and went

back into the kitchen. I sidled up to my mother who put her arm around us. I stared at my stepfather mesmerised. I had never experienced such anger. He looked up and saw me. 'Tell that child to close her eyes. I won't have her looking at me.' But as if by some magic his anger seemed to evaporate. He sat down at the table. Put his head in his hands. Later he looked up and mumbled in his normal gentle voice – 'Sorry'. He got up and went to bed.

"I stood there shivering against my mother. We finally calmed the two little girls and put them back into bed." She frowned at the memory.

"How old were you then?"

Maeve thought for a while. "I suppose four or five. That was the first episode I actually remember. As the years passed they became more frequent. There were times he slapped my mother around but each time I came into the room he would stop. Then he would sit down at the table, his head in his hands, then mumble – sorry, get up and go to bed."

"That's too awful." I said, shocked. "How did this affect you?"

"I became my mother's protector. I slept badly always subconsciously waiting to hear that raised voice."

"It must have affected your school work once you went to school."

"It did, but I had a wonderful teacher. After one of those events she would somehow know. Then at school break she would find me, usually hiding in some far corner of the playground. She would sit down next to me, offer me a banana or some fruit and hold my hand while I ate it. She never asked any questions. But she knew.

"Then after a particularly harrowing night I was crying when she found me. She sat down next to me. I remember she put her arm around me. That comforting hug burst through my reserve and I broke down and told her what had happened. You see while his rage was in full cry I didn't dare cry because that pushed him over the top. Then he would physically assault my mother. Then I had to move in between them, and then only once I stared him straight in the eye would

his anger subside.”

“Dear God!” I couldn’t help saying. “That must have been the scariest thing! How unbelievably brave.”

Again that smile. “I was eight or nine at the time. I was stronger then. I suppose.”

“Why do you feel guilty? You were being abused!

Dash it, Maeve, how could a child be subjected to such unbelievable violence?”

Maeve held up her hand to stop me.

“It was that final episode. I woke and he was screaming and breaking things. Accusing my mother of being unfaithful to him using words I had never heard before, but somehow I understood what they meant. I ran through to the kitchen. The first thing I noticed was his WW1 pistol on the table. This time, however, he sat down at the table and began cleaning the revolver. All the time he was muttering to himself that tonight was the night. That tonight it would end. I have never been so scared. There was a menace that wasn’t there before. Then slowly, deliberately he began to reassemble the gun. Suddenly he stopped. Looked over to where my mother sat holding me. ‘Where’s the screw?’ He said. ‘What have you done with it, woman?’

“First we picked up the bits of crockery. Piece by piece he inspected them before we were allowed to throw them away. It seemed to take forever. Then we swept the floor over and over. My mother’s nerves were so frayed by that time that she dropped her broom and he went crazy. He broke more plates and ordered me to pick up the pieces. Again we went through the procedure with him inspecting each piece before throwing it away. Then again we swept the room. Then he told me to wash the floor. The tension in the room kept me from crying. In a final frustrated burst of rage he hit my mother with the butt of the gun opening a gash across her cheek.” Maeve shuddered.

“So much blood. Then he collapsed from sheer fatigue. It was daybreak. I helped my mother get the bread into the oven, got the children up and dressed. Dressed myself saw to it that my brother was ready and we left for school.

“I suppose a ten year old can only handle so much. In class my teacher asked me a question. I stood up to answer her and that was all I remembered. When I came to I was lying on the couch in the principal’s office. He and my teacher were deep in conversation. He asked her to walk me home once the rubberiness had left my legs. At home she saw the gash over my mother’s cheek and the swollen black eye. The next day when my brother and I got home my aunt Alice was looking after the three younger children. My mother got home late that afternoon. We packed my stepfather’s clothes and the next morning a man arrived to collect them.

“Years later I learnt that my school principal had been to see a magistrate he knew. The next day there was a hearing and my stepfather was committed to the asylum in Grahamstown.”

“I still don’t understand why you have carried this guilt.”

“Life was very hard after he left. He was earning a good salary. Suddenly there was nothing. Despite all that had happened, I suspect that my mother truly loved him.”

I opened my mouth but Maeve cut in. “Yes, I know about the lesser of two evils. But how do you convince a ten year old. That ten year old felt due to her weakness her adored mother lost everything. A child doesn’t rationalize only accepts guilt. Then does all she can to atone for her betrayal.”

Maeve was silent. Horror took my words away.

“I watched that coffin being lowered and the thought struck me that he had been there for 50 years.

Longer than any prison sentence. What a waste.”

Ethiopia at Last (from “The Road to Lake Turkana”)

...Part of a travelogue of a safari from RSA to Ethiopia....

By Peter Baker

Lake Turkana is fed by principally one river, the Omo, which finds its head waters many hundreds of miles away in the central highlands of Ethiopia. The levels of the lake can and do vary by several meters depending upon the rains which feed the Omo.

The Lower Omo River Valley (LORV) is an all encompassing term for the low lands around Omo River and of the great delta into which the Omo fans out as it nears the northern most parts of Lake Turkana. We knew of this delta but had no idea how massive and sprawled out it was, even in the area in which we found ourselves, as we entered Ethiopia for the first time.

Filled up to the gunwales with fresh water and cooled off somewhat as our wet clothing evaporated in the dry heat, we proceeded northwards towards Banya Fort which as it turned out was not a fort but a gathering of huts and a farm house and what appeared to be some sort of agricultural extension services project. There were groups of men squatting under in the shade of the few acacias trees and other trees which had managed to avoid the axes of the energy hungry, which offered the only protection from the unrelenting heat and glare.



The endless passage of time on the African continent.

We took several wrong turns before we found the correct track out of the village and into Ethiopia. Track is a relative term as it was in this case only the broadest of the goat trails which meandered through the dry brown grasslands. We hired a local boy to direct us in the correct heading and he was as proud as punch to be ensconced on the spare wheel of BB's Land Rover pointing left and right as he got his bearings. Even for him there was a little hesitation before he found his bearings. The old African story of having been confused for several days, but never lost. You can get waylaid here as there is not really a road or even track per se in the main perhaps because there is absolutely no vehicular traffic between the peoples of the most far northern part of Kenya and the LORV. At last we found ourselves heading in what appeared to be the right direction and on the right trail of which there were many braiding in and out amongst one another, snaking to the left and right. As the trails were certainly not vehicular but goat paths, they went through bush, dongas, around rocks and suddenly they were gone so we were forced to backtrack to pick up another track heading roughly in the same northerly direction. Finally BB announced that according to his reckoning we were now finally in Ethiopia and as if to confirm it we came across the wildest character any of us had ever seen, perhaps with the exception of yours truly who came from the Eastern Townships south of Montreal, sort of the Ozarks of Canada, and with a population as wild as anywhere else on earth.



The Wild One is the one with the body paint! Note BB's broad grin; he was in for a pound.



Guide

Of course there was no common language even remotely shared between us so it was hand signals and the off chance that the pronunciation of Turmi, or whatever the destination was to be that day, would be somewhat similar in English and what ever lingo the gentleman spoke. He came up to my truck with the broadest of grins, the ever present rifle, plastic water bottle and wooden stool. Thinking that he had some clue as to the “road” to Turmi we placed him on the spare on the bonnet of BB’s vehicle and set off. Pretty soon it became patently obvious that he hadn’t a clue as to where we wanted to go, and besides he had the lift he wanted in the first place to get to get to his destination. He hopped off and made off on foot into the bushes to the west with a big wave, a broad grin of pearly white teeth and a big red apple from Jason.

We stumbled on our way taking the odd wrong turn to the left and right though some very small hamlets of domed grass huts, populated by the Dasanech people. These people live off the land; herding goats, raising small amounts of crops; and off the water, fishing the rich waters of Lake Turkana. As we drove very slowly through the gatherings of humans in the first small villages we experienced our baptism of rural Ethiopia, which was to be an experience repeated in every town, village, hamlet and kraal we passed through. Throngs of children and even women running after each vehicle with the African greeting, an outstretched hand begging for “money”, the only English word know, but indeed known very well even in this extremely remote corner of Ethiopia where foreigners hadn’t travelled for ages. The abject poverty was something even we southern Africans were not used to. Poverty is perhaps not the correct word as it implies a lack or shortage of money, something which I doubt would impact upon the lives of these people. I don’t believe that money played any part in their lives and that the farthest they would ever roam from their tribal village was perhaps a dozen or so km. Most of the children up to the age of teenager were butt naked, the women topless, and wore only cloths or skins around their waists. They were all heavily adorned with metal bracelets, bangles, head gear, beadwork and some body paint. They looked to be perhaps more primitive than their Kenyan tribal counterparts. More tribal might be a better description perhaps. It is something which we “civilized” western citizens should do at our peril; to prejudice such tribal people for if one looks at our lives and theirs by almost every parameter which you may

wish to measure, they are more advanced and geared for survival than are we.



Our first encounter with the “you you you’s”

And their survival is in one of the most harsh places on earth in which you might find yourself living. Of course they do not have microwaves in their kitchens, (they don’t even have kitchens for Pete’s sake), DSTv, cell phones (thank the Pope!), or the caloric intake which we rejoice in but then again they are not destroying their environment and in so doing jeopardizing the generations yet unborn. They lead a self-contained and self-preserved existence which puts no one at risk, yet some of our actions many thousands of miles away are having a direct impact upon their lives in a real and very detrimental fashion; global warming and the ever increasing greenhouse effect, and global high altitude pollution to name a few.

As it was in the heat of the day the men appeared to be more circumspect, rarely moving from their chat groups under the shade of the trees. We stopped to meet with some of the locals and when Pete gave a girl an orange it was evident that she hadn’t a clue what to do with it. He peeled it and broke off pieces for her to eat; it was clear that she had never seen an orange before in her life. Jason had a two liter plastic bottle which he gave to another young lady who was as pleased as a Sandtonian would be with a new Porsche motor car. These beautiful people were happy and all had permanent smiles on their faces but also kept up the chatter for money with the outstretched hands all pointing in our faces. Sort of cute we thought, that they knew such a basic term in English but little did we know that this would eventually become one of the most irritating things about this otherwise fascinating country. We eventually came to a large dry river bed which we crossed, whereupon we saw the first evidence of another vehicle’s tyre tracks. We were at

last on the road which would take us, according to BB's Russian map on his laptop, to the main road between Turmi and Omorate.

Anyone wishing to repeat this expedition should seriously entertain getting this map programme as well as the correct topo-maps.

There was according to the maps a branch off this track heading to the east which would take us to the same Omorate-Turmi road but several km closer to Turmi. We had no idea what the roads would be like after the track we were on and which was not very clearly indicated on any but the Russian topo maps. Even that map was many km out, as the track we were on and which track was being traced on the map, was several km to the east of the road on the map. As long as you are on a track and heading in a northerly direction I reckon that you will ultimately hit the main Omorate-Turmi road.

We continued crossing one large, (some of the sandy, flat and bone dry riverbeds were over 100 meters wide) riverbed after the other and kept on losing the track we were trying to follow only to pick it up again further along. The riverbeds were all intertwined and full of up-rooted trees, boulders and an incredible volume of other flotsam. A very encouraging sign was the complete lack of any man made product or artifact amongst the debris. No plastic bags, cartons, paper, wire, beer cans, or styrofoam cups. After several km of snaking through and around the islands of trees and trying to follow the trail we came to the realization that we were not going to make Turmi village that night so I decided that we should take an abrupt right turn to the east and follow one of the main riverbeds and find a spot to overnight. Fortunately, since we began crossing this major tributary of the Omo we did not encounter a single village, goat or tribesman so I felt that we would not be disturbed by any lurking locals. The sheer size of this single tributary coming in from the east was mind boggling. We had traveled some 5km across and through one riverbed after the other with seemingly no end in sight, and I use the term "sight" pointedly as the terrain was as flat as a pancake, without so much as a hint of a point of elevation. We drove some 2 or 3 km up one of the principal branches of the tributary and found an almost perfect location to set up our first camping spot in Ethiopia. We were elated and even before we had

thought of getting organized with the setup of camp; we took out our camp chairs and broke open a supply of our brewsters of choice. We had made it and what a thrill it was. Hilda could not stop her constant chatter of sheer exhilaration of the place and time we found ourselves, in between taking long swigs from her can of beer and even longer hauls from her cigarette. As a group we had endured some degree of hardship and suffering in conditions which we do not all that readily find back in SA or adjacent countries, and if we do find them they are in patches within a few hundred miles of some major centre. We were on a flat sandy area surrounded by some large acacia trees and some brush, with banks of dead drift wood in huge embankments in every direction. Not a single sound other than our whispers, for we did initially keep our voices down in case there happened to be locals lurking about in the vicinity, but what we did see when foraging for wood was that there were no foot prints, no goat tracks and no donkey droppings, so we realized that we had the entire place all to ourselves. Not a foot print in the sand other than our own. Pete the bean farmer and Hilda respectfully stubbed their fags into empty beer cans. Set up, washed and dressed in a clean set of togs, actually sarongs, we set about the evening's performance. Jason made a Cracker Jack fire not having to worry any longer about peeping toms and with drift wood for Africa. Of course it would be very difficult for even the hardiest of souls to even think of approaching this massive drainage system in the rainy season, for when the rains came and the rivers all came down in flood, this dry riverbed must have been a sight to see. Anyone wishing to travel the same sort of course as we, must pick the season very carefully and plan well around the dry rainless season. We were very fortunate in that we never had to cope with rain the entire time we were travelling through the LORV. The rainy season is supposed to be March to May, definitely not the time to attempt to cross from Kenya into Ethiopia along Lake Turkana and the Omo River. The extent of this single water course draining into the Omo would only become fully apparent to us once we completed the entire traverse, but we were to have some real fun and games before that was to be accomplished. It ultimately transpired that this tributary of the Omo was almost 20 km in breadth.



Campsite on the Omo tributary.

A wonderful fire, a camp as remote as we could ever wish for, laughter and good camaraderie and a sky as black and starry as rarely seen before anywhere on earth, a great feast in our bulging bellies and Graham goes and ruins it all by insisting that we partake of his red wine plonk, of which he announces in embarrassment, that he still had another 50 liters to pass through someone's gastrointestinal tract. He was in dire need of our valued and heretofore healthy livers. We all pledged to make the effort in order to spread the liver damage and in the best of spirits we all soldiered on. Barry and Hanna were let off the hook as it was a well known fact that they did not drink wine! We chatted and speculated well into the night about what we thought might be in store for us the following day as we would certainly encounter some authority in Turmi who might wish to inspect our documents for visas, customs and immigration stamps and vehicle papers, some of which we were OK with and others a perhaps a little on the less than OK side. That would be the challenge of the 'morrow, but today was today and to be fully enjoyed. This was indeed a very special campsite and one we shall all remember and we remarked that if possible that we should plan a reunion sometime in the far future to find the exact spot to overnight. This place was blessed with an eternity of time in a world in which the only changes seen were the seasonal rains which brought a brief respite to the unending heat of the day.

The fire pit was still hot enough the following morning to rustle up a fire and coffee was produced, Hilda's Boere Koffee and my Coleman's percolator. It was a glorious morning and so sadly we broke camp, but took GPS co-ords in case we ever passed this way again, a silly thought really because with each rainy

season and the resultant flooding that followed, the entire landscape was certain to change and then settle to dry out for the rest of the year. We realized our fortune in delaying the trip from the earlier date to April to July. Had we arrived even close to the rains we would have gotten bogged down in mud and quick sand. Certainly not a pleasant thought.

We inspected BB's laptop which he had mounted on the arm rest between the two front seats of his Land Rover, and noticed that the track which we missed several km back and which made a long arcing swoop to the east before it turned northerly to hit the Omorate-Turmi road, crossed the very Omo River tributary which were on, at a point some 26 kilometers further to the east. Always a "Bok for sport" as they say in the classics we decided to head up the river bed and Inshallah hit the point where the road or track crossed the river. Certainly no one had ever driven where we were. This was an exciting thought to those always on the lookout for virgin territory. The going was excellent, as good as sand driving can get, firm enough that we did not even have to deflate the tyres and with a track 100 meters wide in places it was a superlative driving experience for all of us.



Driving at it best on the Omo tributary.

We made excellent progress and in many places we were able to drive four abreast so wide was the river. It was really quite something to imagine this very place we were enjoying in desert conditions, would within minutes be a raging torrent of swirling brown flood waters. Some of the uprooted trees were enormous, yet they were tossed around like kindling wood such was the force of last year's flood waters. Eventually we came to a steep canyon which narrowed the river, (heretofore had been many miles wide) to perhaps 30 meters at the most. There was mud and a trickle of water in the canyon which halted us in our tracks. We walked

down the canyon several dozen meters until it opened into an enormous amphitheatre where you could see the flood water level some 75 to 100 meters up the walls.



The canyon which stopped our progress up the Omo tributary.

Boulders as big as a Land Rover had been tossed about like pebbles on a beach. Around the bend we came to the end of our possible progress as the river gorge was filled with boulders which would have created a cascading waterfall when the river was less than in full flood. So that was that, we would have to retrace our steps back to the original track we had travelled on and from thence to continue in a northerly direction until we hit the main Omorate-Turmi road. We huddled around the vehicles in a small war council and GE noted that the river along which we had travelled came very close, 3 or 4 km in fact, to the Turmi-Omorate road. Trailer and so he “volunteered” to do a little off road bundu-bashing in order to see whether it was feasible to make our way through the bush to save the 22 km trip back to the other track. Go for it we all said; we’d settle under a shade tree to drink coffee to await the outcome.

I don’t know what made me look under my Landy but I did and noticed that the rear of each of the two back shocks had disappeared, leaving only the upper mounting and an inch of the steel shaft from the top attachment of the shock. BB to the rescue and within minutes he was under the beast, so fast was he to the attack that I didn’t even have time to get a tarp out for him to lie on, so he emerged covered in sand, but he had the old rear OME shocks of Hilda installed in two ticks and off we went. This was a typical BB move, totally unselfish, committed to the well being of the group and never one to say his tools were “deep”. We

retraced our tracks and just where we were as close as we were going to get to the Omorate-Turmi road, GE and Son took a sharp turn to the right and disappeared into the dense bush. Pete and Hilda decided to re-trace the track back to the camp as they were not too optimistic about the chances of GE’s success so did some serious bird watching at a old man’s pace as they meandered off in a westerly direction.



Barry in his favourite place, under a Landy.

We had agreed to keep the radios open in case of success or failure and settled under a shady tree to pass a few pleasurable hours doing not much of anything other than wait in the ambient 43° heat....but of course not a word was uttered. Hanna got out her kitchen from the back of the Landy, brewed a cuppa for herself and Beth (always Bok for tea), Barry got out his first cold beer of the day and I settled close to the base of the tree in my camp chair and drank the rest of the thermos of black Kenyan coffee. This is what African travel is all about, having the time to relax with absolutely nothing to do but to watch the movement of the few clouds in the sky and to just sit and wait, and to wait some more, and then wait some more again. If you can learn anything from travel it is the fine art of doing that which we never do in real life in the big bad city. Wait and watch.



Chill out spot waiting for GE & Son.

So we in our chosen spots passed the time of day, I graduated from coffee to beer, BB went on to more beer and the ladies did like wise with volumes of Kenyan Chai. We waited for about three hours before becoming worried as we had heard nothing from GE and that was somewhat unusual as he liked his new found functional radio. We called and called without success so decided that we would follow his track which lead deep into the bush. At the edge of the dry river bed we called again and fortunately picked him up on 29MHz. He had gotten very stuck going through a deep ditch, but always chipper said that he could dig himself out in only a few hours but unfortunately the shovel was deep so he happily took up our offer to come to lend a hand. I parked off and we left the ladies to chatter and drink tea. I walked on ahead of BB's Land Rover as Graham's track was difficult to follow from the cab. The rolling and undulating bushveld was fairly dense, which necessitated a lot of backwards and forwards to get up some of the rises and to skirt some of the bigger trees. Finally G called to say he had a visual of us and directed us the short distance to where we found him royally stuck to put it mildly. He had not seen how deep the ditch was until he was right into the middle of it, and once he was caught up on the trailer hitch he wasn't able to move an inch. He could have dug for two days and he still would have been no better off. His back wheels were high and dry, and right off the ground. Barry had a dodgy old tow rope which was connected and after some low range high torque, the blasted rope snapped. "Ah shit" was his exclamation. I offered my brand new rope, but no way, his was again knotted and again we heaved and "voilà" he was out. You see, it is a fallacy that Toyota's are Land Rover recovery vehicles, sometimes the converse is true.

A quick beer break was called for. GE and Son had managed to bundu bash to within less than 200 meters of the main road, but came up against a series of huge erosion dongas which were impossible to get around or through. Somewhat disappointed we headed back to the river bed and called Pete and Hilda who were very chilled and waiting for us to arrive. They had made a few excellent bird spots including two firsts for Pete.

Back on the track crossing the tributary we did another several kms before coming into open grass lands and a pretty decent strip road. Three km and we finally

hit the main Omorate-Turmi road which was an excellent graded gravel road, wide shoulders, drainage ditches and a pleasure.



The last stretch before hitting the Omorate-Turmi road.

On either side of the road lay endless mile after mile of Ethiopia bushveld alternating with open grasslands. We didn't encounter a single soul, only some kudu, dik dik, and several new species of birds including some different pigeons, starlings and shrikes. As we drove on towards what was to be our first encounter with a serious Ethiopian town, we saw off to the right the range which blocked our path when we drove up the riverbed. A short while later we passed the intersection with the road which we missed a few days earlier. That this track should be explored is a certainty.

Over a slight rise in the road a big truck approached us at speed and was heading right for me. I panicked and swerved into the right lane; reminder: they drive on the right hand side of the road in Ethiopia. To make us all look even more stupid we all made the point of reminding one another, as we hit the main road, that we should drive on the right, but out of habit and as we were all pretty "kekdaar", as enthralled as we were to finally be on the highroad in Ethiopia, we had all gradually meandered onto the left side of the road.

We slowed down as we approached the village of Turmi, and the mandatory boom just before the Ethiopia Police station on the right. We were ushered through and stopped in the full sun in front of the station. We were immediately swamped by two dozen kids and semi-adults all very excited to see some strangers in town. A few candies changed hands and the Commander-In-Chief came out to greet us and to go over the paperwork. It was 38° but it felt far hotter

n the direct sun. We introduced ourselves and offered the stack of papers he no doubt was interested in seeing. The Carnets, Letters of Introduction, and Passports were produced all of which were inspected with a fine tooth comb. Fortunately the head honcho spoke adequate English which made matters much easier. He immediately picked up a discrepancy between the actual licence plate and the Carnet of BB's Landy which necessitated some fancy footwork, but which was resolved after some convoluted grammatical obfuscation. We had not cleared Customs or Immigration which we said we would be doing, as per our letter of introduction, in Arba Minch or Addis. No problem, "Chigger Yellem", we were prompted as our first introduction to Amharic. Smiles all round he instructed us to have a very pleasurable stay in his village and we drifted down the road towards the camp site one of the officers had indicated to us. The entire village seemed to be our entourage as they followed in our dust when we pulled into the little thatched "Tourist Hotel/Restaurant" on the RHS of the road a few 100 meters from the cop shop. We were in for our first taste of Ethiopia, something which changed all of our lives to a greater or lesser degree. We westerners were meeting up with a cultural experience few of us anticipated and perhaps will never experience again. Amongst the mainly traditionally dressed locals was a smattering of very traditionally clad Hamar girls and ladies. Ochre and lard ringletted hair, copper and aluminum bracelets and necklaces, extravagant bead work and earrings and large cowry shelled bandoliers around their necks. Well worn leather cloths covered a minimum of the anatomy of these most incredibly beautiful women and girls. I was besotted with them from the first encounter. These people were very clingy and loved to be close to you, even a faranji, or foreigner.

Not in any way threatening, it was to all of a sign of a very warm band of individuals. Within minutes of arrival we found ourselves holding hands with many of the girls and young boys in a most innocent fashion. For some strange reason we were not besieged by the throngs of people all with open begging hands. We had all become very aware of the hysterics that we might cause as faranji when travelling through the more rural areas of the country, but we didn't really experience anything untoward in Turmi in this regard.

We were greeted by the lovely owner of the establishment, a very non-tribal young lady. Here I must point

out some observations which I made very early on during our travels in Ethiopia, that there appeared to be a considerable divide both culturally and socially between the tribal citizens and the more northern non-tribal people. Here I use the term tribal in the sense of traditional. I got the feeling that there was almost an unwritten apartheid as the Hamar people seemed to be made to keep apart from the others in the village, not in any harmful or prescribed fashion but as if by some unwritten tradition or mores.



The Faranji have arrived; Tourist Hotel/Restaurant Turmi

We were ushered into the thatched rondavel and sat around the beach around the wall and on the few chairs at a couple of tables. There were some locals eating a meal of the traditional injera wat with the local St Georges beer, very good brew but sadly in a minuscule 300ml bottle. We almost wore out the bottle opener. We were all famished so opted for several platters of the injera, which is made from a sour dough rolled into a large thin roti type of flat bread, with holes much like a crumpet. It is made from the grain of a local grass called tef, which does not have the same gluten like qualities of wheat, so produces a very different product. It is definitely an acquired taste as it does not have doughy, bread like taste but a bitter sour doughy taste and rubbery texture. It has been described by others as having the texture of a bath mat! If in Ethiopia you will be obliged to like it as it is just about the only thing you can get in many places. You can therefore be pretty well assured that it will always be fresh and that the wat, the meat, lentil or vegetable dishes which are scooped up with chunks of the injera will be likewise fresh and very tasty. Kai wat is fairly hot but according to GE still OK for his morning corn flakes, the milder form is alicha wat. The injera is served on a large round aluminum platter and the wat is served in small soup bowls. Very interestingly one of the young

attendants came to each of us with a pitcher of warm water in order that we might wash our hands before we were served. An early inclination to the amazing new culture we were being introduced to. We each in turn exuberantly washed our hands before the meal was presented to us. Curiously though, we noticed that a trucker with whom I had been talking only washed his right hand; an interesting blend of Muslim and Christian influences perhaps.

Dish after dish were brought from the smoky dark kitchen; all cooked over charcoal briars. The food was very tasty but I had to admit that the injera took some getting used to, the wat were all excellent and we sent the empty bowls back for several refills. BB and HB stuck to a more safe and conventional dish of omelets!

The St Georges went down a treat in the heat of the day and we settled into some fairly deep conversation with the trucker who spoke very good English and who had good knowledge of the area seeing as he was a Turmi native. We were anxious about diesel supplies and discovered chigger yellem that there was a “private dealer” in town who had a fresh supply, and that he, the trucker, would arrange that we would be able to buy what ever we required. Very replete we were offered a “coffee ceremony”, which when you go to Ethiopia is a must no matter how many times you are offered it and how much it makes you late. The only thing comparable to my mind was the offer of a very good Habana Cigar at a posh restaurant in Bahrain. The hostess there, a beautiful, café au lait, young Filipino lady, dipped the cigar into a glass of Cognac and proceeded to work the liquor into the cigar by massaging it on her inner thighs and between her breasts. Better that the best strip show in Montréal and that takes some beating! But that is another storey for another time and another place, children may be reading. Not that the coffee ceremony is such a sexy thing but it is all about the lovely way in which the young lady sorted the green beans before scattering them on a flat sheet of metal which was placed over a red hot charcoal briar. She made the beans “dance” in order by keeping them constantly turned so that they did not burn, but roasted into a deep brown colour. The smell made the caffeine addicts such as yours truly and Hilda D go just about mad. This process took the better part of 30 minutes and the heart beat raced in anticipation. Next she placed them in a large wooden pestle which was placed between her feet and the process of grinding the beans commenced. The smell of the ground beans

wafted into everyone’s noses. No Braun coffee grinders in this neck of the woods mister!



Roasting of the beans.

The slow methodical pounding of the mortar into the pestle with a musical cadence further added to the excitement of ceremony which we had all heard about but never witnessed. To further add to the sense of mystery of the occasion, another smaller earthenware container was brought out and some charcoal embers placed inside. What looked to be chunks of grey black resin were placed on top of the coals producing clouds of spruce smelling incense. It was a stunning experience as the pounding of the mortar continued. We watched in further anticipation. Once the beans were sufficiently ground an earthenware coffee pot was placed over the fire and heated up. The ground coffee beans were added and the mixture was stirred with a spoon. This mix was poured into small Turkish type coffee cups repeatedly with the coffee pot being raised several feet above the cup, the small stream being aimed perfectly into the dead centre of the small cup. Ready to serve we were offered sugar but I still think that is far more to the point to take it as it comes, strong and black. The little dining room cum bar was pretty smoky by now, and the aroma of the Ethiopia

coffee mingling with the spruce gum resin incense is something which I can still so fondly recollect of the second day in this most interesting country. The locals were all so very keen to see how the faranji were enjoying their coffees that each of the open spaces around the rondavel was filled with smiling and giggling black faces.



A beautiful Hamer lady; the two large necklaces indicate that she is the "first wife" of her husband.

After paying the bill paid we inquired about the various options for camping in the area. A young lad offered to take us to the "only campsite in town." He perched himself on the spare tyre on the front bonnet and off the convoy headed with a throng of screaming kids running behind eating the dust. He directed us to what was apparently a municipal run campsite a few km down the Weita road. We passed many Hamer tribesmen and women, all of whom waved a greeting, flashing large white smiles as we drove by. Over a stream we saw a pretty elaborate campsite on the right hand side of the road, "Evangelico Camp", or something to that effect. We were however directed onwards as that place was "no good". A little further we turned off to the right and followed a dusty track to another campsite under a grove of large shade trees. Not a blade of grass was to be seen. I inquired about the place and such matters as security and water. Two AK-47 totting youths assured me that security was no problem, chigger yellem, as they were in charge. The said that they would shoot anyone who came to rob us. I was curious about the campsite we saw back along the road and was told in no uncertain terms that that place was not approved by the community and that it was possible that there would be shootings there as had been the case previously. This place was run by the community and was the campsite approved by the local community so we must stay here. Finish

and Klaar! I checked out the shower, a drum (empty) which was strung up in a small enclosure (open on the side facing the entrance to the camp) and asked about water. Chigger yellem, they would bring from the nearby muddy river. The rates certainly were not cheap so a brief war council was held and it was decided to check out the other place just to make a comparison. Our guide hopped back on the spare and off we set. At the entrance to the Evangelico he jumped off and skedaddled, down the road, so I guessed that there was some sore of bad blood between the two outfits. We were ushered in by what I recognized as an up country gentleman, as opposed to a tribal man. We discussed the options and prices of the accommodation and were given the tour de force of the place. The several acres site was walled (grass mainly) in and boasted a dozen furnished tents, with beds, carpets, and what we found to be neatest of all, slippers! The ablutions were in the far corner with flush toilets and showers; we were in paradise. Strung between the trees were electric wires for the new electric light which the generator lit up from 7-10pm. This was excellent, as we would be able to plug in our freezers which were taking strain in the heat. We had not been able to keep the freezers fully deep frozen due to the relatively few hours we spent actually driving which was required to keep the batteries charged and freezer compressors operational. A generator would have been a great thing to have taken on such an expedition as it would have relieved some of the strain the electrical systems took. It would also have allowed us to stop for longer periods without having to run the engines. Next time.



BB, a very happy camper: RTT set up and a cold one in his hand.

We took three tents and BB opted for his RTT.

Predictably, even before we had put our bags into the

tents BB had his arm chairs out and a very cold Windhoek in his mitt. The manager of the establishment had wood and charcoal brought and said that we could build our fire for cooking anywhere we wished. He was a very accommodating chap and was always there to be of service. I noticed a few young girls standing outside the fallen down grass wall to the back of the campsite, all dressed in skins, bare topped, and bedecked in bangles, bracelets and head gear. Smiles beckoned so I went over to say Howzit? I was in love at first sight with all of them; wide white smiles from ear to ear, they all were chewing twigs of some tree which was their Contour-Plus toothbrush and Colgate toothpaste. They all could have been models so beautiful they were. Coy to the last I thought of kidnapping them back to SA as my Tinkerbellies, but alas I was not Peter Pan so perhaps only a fanciful thought.



My little beauties!

They spoke a smattering of English so we could communicate after a fashion. They indicated that they went to school so I went and got them some note pads and Bic pens but the more I gave out the more hands there were outstretched. It was like feeding the 5000 but I was not Jesus.

It is a sad truth that these little angels would at some stage in the near future undergo ritual female circumcision. The young girl second from the right with the two thick neck ornaments was probably married or engaged and could well have already undergone the horrific operation, whereby she is restrained by other older women and her clitoris is excised and her labia are sewn together leaving only a small orifice. Sexual gratification is for men only; the women are mere sperm receptacles. How they give birth God alone knows. Women with heavy knobs of aluminum on the

front of the necklaces are the “main” wife of a certain man; the men are of course polygamous.

A tribal man, the night watch from the camp trotted over and told the kids to “foetsek” in the local dialect which despite my protests they did only to reappear from behind the bushes as soon as he went back to his post. I promised to find something to give the girls the next day and off they trotted into the bush. Their kraal was apparently only a few hundred meters away and that was the last I thought I would see them that day.



My apprentice car washer.... in the making. “I’m far too beautiful to work”

We set up in the very comfortable and spacious tents and organized things for the formal proceedings which were to take place around the fire that evening. Dinner is always a formal occasion regardless of where you find yourself, a principle we stuck to every night. One of the local chaps, high forehead strong sinewy body was wandering around watching us and I asked if he knew how to wash a truck? Apparently not, so I instructed him to fetch water in buckets, I gave him rags and chamois cloths and did a crash course in the car valleting. It was obvious that the men in these parts do not get into very much physical labour, it messes up their hair and they have too much jewelry which always seems to get in the way; besides it is far easier to get a woman to do the work. This is exactly what happens. The men sit and look beautiful and sub-contract a woman to do the work. Whoever says that these people are primitive are all wrong!

Anyway on this one occasion my man corralled a mate and they set about actually washing the four vehicles themselves and didn’t do all that bad a job after being told that it was far better to start on the top and to work down rather than to wash the same spot a dozen times working from the bottom up. Basics my dear Livingston, but not to the impractical. Finally the jobs

done, the money passed into the palms, the shining smiles from ear to ear and another day started to draw to a close. I noticed in the dim light of dusk light that my girls were back at the fence waiting for me to come over to talk. No sooner that was I at the fence passing out a few candies than the night watch leaped like a gazelle over the low part of the bramble fence and with stick in hand chased the kids beating them severely as he caught up with each. One small and very cute little boy, who was new to the group, really kopped it and was singled out for a heavy thrashing despite my protests to stop. "No, they are like rats", the guard said. Like vermin. Sure enough as he went off to the entrance to the camp and his little guard post the kids all tricked back, hands outstretched for the candies, the littlest boy, who got the beating of his life, his tears drying left long streaks down his dusty black face.

He got a hand full of wrapped sweeties and scampered down the path before the others could take them from him.

The toilets were lit, as were the showers, large spacious enclosures with some shelving and a place to dry. No hot water, but after the heat of the day the cold water was very refreshing and not at all unpleasant. The toilets were not flush but had to be doused with a bucket of water from the mosquito breeding 45 Gallon drum outside the door. For the pleasure of a real toilet seat in this neck of the woods it rated a 6 out of ten on the Baker Scale. There were also starting block squatters for the so inclined. The sit down jobs were fine thank you very much; more than adequate for the occasion. The generator was right next door to the ablution block and was in some way quite reassuring that there was some progress afoot in this very remote quarter of South Western Ethiopia.

This campsite was owned and operated by a very large Addis based Italian owned tour operator company which also owns and operates many hotels, camps and the like around the country. As we were to find during the course of our travels through southern and central Ethiopia, Italians appeared to be the most numerous visitors to the country although we also encountered many Dutch, and Germans.

We settled around the fire, which made the sparkling clean vehicles twinkle in reflection of the electric light bulbs, a very pleasing sight to all of us. Our now AK

totting night watch came over to our fire and ensconced himself on his little bum stool and looked on forlornly as we tucked into a hearty South African braai. We dished him up a massive bowl of kos which he made small work of, stowing some choice pieces of meat into a bag he carried, probably for late in the night. We heard the distinct cracking sound from the firing of an AK-47 in the direction of the municipal campsite. Four or five rounds and then more of the silence of the night. No one seemed in the least alarmed so why should we worry? We moved closer to the fire and refilled our glasses and talked about the events of the day, the coffee, the beautiful women and the overall pleasure we all were sensing at being so far from home, in such a different (to say the least) country and to have the good company we all had the good fortune to share. We all moved off into the night, to our tents and blissful sleep.

The morning was overcast but the heat quickly rose through the high 20's and through the 30's although we did not dare say a word for fear that Hanna might realize just how hot it was. BB took the battery out of his thermometer and I did not offer a glimpse of mine to anyone. We spent several hours socializing with the locals and cleaning and servicing the vehicles. I had a few DVD's which were given to me by my Local Mr. Video shop in Peter Place and so I took the opportunity to have a movie show for the kids. I placed the ThinkPad laptop which IBM kindly lent me for the trip and placed it on an old water tank facing the back of the compound where the kids could watch without fear, so I thought, of the guard harassing them. I didn't have pop corn but I had plenty of fizz suckers and candies for all. Without a second's warning the same night watch leaped over the bushes and tore after the kids. They scattered and fortunately the little guy who was whipped the previous day did not kop it again. I had a brief intermission and restarted when they all re-assembled. I spoke to the manager and he said he would call off the guard this time only. The cartoon show continued and the laughter was once again heard throughout the camp. I don't think that these kids had seen so many colours and certainly never an animated cartoon before in their lives. If I could have broken some of the monotony of their little lives I think that I was successful.

We finished our cleanups and with a lessened load of dust on the inside to the vehicles we said out adieus

and headed back to town to look for diesel, buy bread for lunch and to check out the Hamer market. As we entered town we were surrounded by dozens of kids, youths and adults all with something to offer in the way of guiding, handicrafts (everything was for sale even the rags on the kids backs), whatever we wanted they could get in no time, chigger yellem! The per capita income in such back waters as the LORV must be on the verge of zero as the people do not have any real cash economy and any infusion of hard cash from such small incidentals as money for photos and the tourist trade, for handicrafts like beadwork, cannot be enough to really sustain a family.

We bought all the bread in the bakery, yellow and sweet and very pleasant. Next we headed across the road to look into the availability of diesel which would take some of the stress out of the rest of the trip as far as Jinka. We had a dozed “agents” wishing to have us use their good offices to procure what we needed. The chap with the diesel keeps it in his front yard and usually sells it by the five liters, was only too pleased to sell us all he had, so that we once again we all had full or almost full tanks. There was the usual siphoning of fuel through dodgy hose pipes and the resultant sloshing of diesel in the mouth by the flunkie who the owner instructed to do the dirty work. When things got out of hand and there was some spillage, the owner took the hose to show the youngsters how to suck diesel and to get the siphon to work. These guys like the taste of diesel and it was not unusual to see one of the siphoners sloshing the fuel around in his mouth much as you or I gargle with Listerine.



Refueling at Turmi, not for those in a rush.

Tanks full, we headed down the narrow alley to the Hamer market which is held in a small cleared area in

front of a few pretty run down hotels and eateries.



Hamer market, Turmi

This was an experience to behold. The kids from the camp had all run to town to join us and we had hands to hold as we walked around checking out the wares on sale. Not a great selection of anything other than tobacco (incredibly strong), corn (very poor grade mixed grain), spinach (OK), bananas (mostly small, black and dry) and several varieties of poor quality millet. There was no shortage of muti of every make and description for which we never managed to get any true idea of the intended usage. There were rows of Hamer women all selling and other row of men likewise, but virtually no mingling of the two. All the men carried their little stools and walking sticks, the women had satchels, usually with cowrie beading, around their necks. The pervading aroma of the place was of hickory smoked bacon. It was a marvelous experience and well worth the time we spent wandering around aimlessly.



Jason the ever popular one with the kids.

We went back to the restaurant to say good buy and to collect some of the incense which the young lady had

We went back to the restaurant to say good buy and to collect some of the incense which the young lady had scrounged for me around town. I got a wonderful kiss goodbye, good enough I might add to give me cause to return sooner than later. We hugged and climbed back into our beasts and off we went into the west towards Omorate. My little Tinkerbelles, some with elaborate face stripes of white facial and body paint lined up on the road for a last good-bye and I would like to think that they will be as "out of a fairy tale" next time I see them but I can well imagine that they will be married, butchered, and probably heavily pregnant or with baby at the breast.



My beauties with note books sad to see their friends heading off.

I know that I have indicted earlier my honest anxiety about the welfare of these beautiful tribal people and that it was by sincere desire that if I have encouraged fellow South Africans to travel the road less travelled in order to seek out these wonder, that it would not be at the expense of the relatively pristine existence of the people. However all the same I have a heartfelt commiseration with these little girls and the thousands like them who undergo female circumcision all in the name of tradition. I am a great traditionalist in my own culture and often quote poet W.H. Auden who said of tradition that it "is the only link between the dead and the as yet unborn". This being the case I am perplexed how to maintain the traditional cultures of such people as the Hamar in Ethiopia and others like them in Kenya and Tanzania yet to disapprove of this rite into womanhood which they have to suffer in the name of that self same tradition. It is a dilemma you will no doubt be faced with when you travel there. The wonderful complexity of the African tapestry is in no small part due to the different peoples who continue to exist and in many ways to flourish despite the influence of western culture, T-shirts, jeans, Marlboro,

and the Internet. It is said that the next century will see the elimination of 100's of tribes worldwide. What is Africa's share of this decimation much of which is brought about in the name of progress and the all pervading western (American) culture? (Is that not an oxymoron?) We who have the privilege to visit and to witness such cultures as the Hamar, Samburu, and Pokot to name but a few, must do all we can to help them to maintain their traditions in the purest of forms much as some aspects are totally disagreeable to us.

For comments, suggestions and criticism, please do not hesitate to contact us via e-mail at any time.

If you wish to submit material we shall look forward to receiving your writings or photographs.

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Yours Sincerely,

The New Richmond Reader