A photograph of a person's legs and feet in sandals, using long-handled snake tongs to handle a large, dark-colored snake on dry, reddish-brown earth. A smaller, lighter-colored snake is also visible on the ground nearby.

# THE DAY I DIED

Frederick Sterzel

**True tales of my deadly encounters with  
dangerous snakes, animals and people**

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Rosslyn Press

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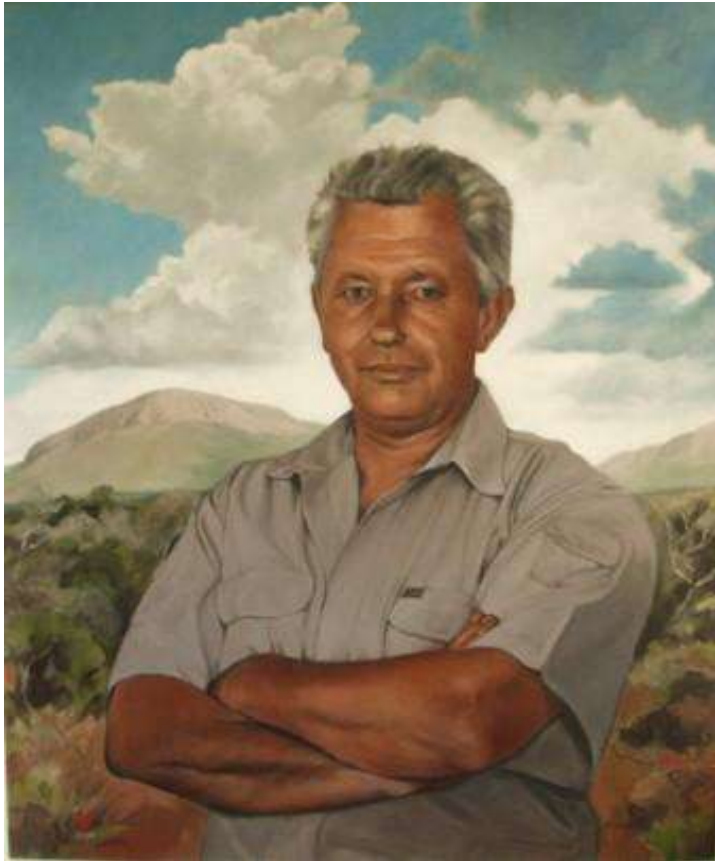
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These are true tales of an African life for my grandchildren and other children of my country: May this inspire you – deter you – caution you and above all entertain you.



**Portrait of Frederick Sterzel, painted by Roderick John Freemantle**

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# Introduction

We all need at least one Hero, real or imagined, at crucial times in our lives; one shining model of virtue to save us or protect us when things get tough, we're really stuck and don't know what to do to help ourselves.

Once upon a time, when I was about ten, my hero was Morgyn the Mighty. He was the strongest man in the world; the sole survivor of the shipwrecked schooner Hebrides, stranded off Black Island. He was the Master of the Island and through strength and virtue he gained control over the Dark Forces.

Time marches on. I'm sixty three now and the intervening years have flashed by in a blur. Odd impressions stand out in focus from the smudged background of memory. Each time, in these more or less conscious moments, a Hero has always appeared as the central character of the drama, in the role of Guide or Protector in different shapes and forms – and always at exactly the right time.

Some of these moments stand out clearly.

I was about thirty-five when I suddenly became aware of myself sitting in a room with about fifty other people. We were all dressed in formal clothes, upright, attentive and very quiet. Facing this sombre group was a distinguished looking elderly gentleman in a pin-striped suit seated on an ornately carved armchair with a bowl of flowers and a glass of water beside him. The old gentleman was speaking. I can't remember what he said, but will never forget the quality and depth of the sound of his voice, softly spoken, but booming, like thunder right overhead. I wondered why I couldn't stop my heart from banging so hard and so rapidly in my chest. Outside, in a vast space, I could hear distant sounds on the horizon.

When the old man was finished speaking, the group stood up respectfully and waited while he slowly left the room. He had

the bearing and grace of royalty. At one point he turned in my direction and his eyes, magnified by thick lenses, burned into mine. I felt vulnerable and exposed like never before or since, but at the same time redeemed, like a little boat lost at sea caught for a moment in the sweeping beam of a lighthouse.

In that single flash, I caught a glimpse of my own condition at the time: a rare, deep look at myself. And what I saw there was not the charming self-portrait I had painted in my imagination. What I saw was a man in deep trouble too proud to admit that he needed help. I knew instantly that my 'troubles' were mostly of my own design, but that there was a way to repair the damage and that help was very close at hand.

As a result of this meeting, I am personally no wiser now than I was then, but the 'little boat' has been patched up and guided into safer waters. 'My life' since then has been supported by purpose and meaning and many steady hands have helped me steer a truer course.

Over the years I gradually became more acquainted with those quiet, dignified, extraordinary people who attended the old man's talk that night. I attended their meetings and got to know a few of them intimately. Through these genuine friends I have come to realise that men and women of heroic stature, semi-divine and perfected beings, saints and devils live and breathe among us ordinary mortals, if only we had eyes to see their subtle forms and ears to hear their silent messages.

There are many examples in my personal experience of heroic acts, extraordinary devotion and supernormal encounters, probably too weird and wonderful to write down here. I have met some amazing people in my time, but the author of this book deserves a special mention.

He was in the audience at the meeting with the old man so many years ago and he has subsequently gained permanent

residence in my heart; a superb human being and a real life Hero; the author of these fantastic stories, Frederick Sterzel.

I first saw him when the group gathered after the meeting in another room for refreshments. He is definitely not the sort of man who disappears in a crowd, but I noticed something else about him that gave me a quite a shock. I knew I had never met him before, but his face and his powerful build reminded me of someone I knew very well.

And then I recognised him. It was Morgyn the Mighty!

He was the exact image of my boyhood Hero, only now he was not dressed in a leopard-skin loincloth, but neatly turned out in a tailored suit with a bright red silk tie! I have never told him until this moment that I secretly knew his true identity all along. It is a matter of honour and respect, you see.

But now you all might as well know the truth.

Morgyn the Mighty has had a thousand names. He has been called Odysseus, Hercules and Samson. At another time he was Arjuna, the Mighty Armed. He's got a bit of Tarzan mixed with Superman in him too.

But these days, those who know him call him Fred.

Please enjoy these remarkable 'war stories' told by the Hero himself. And, please, listen carefully. Nothing is ever what it seems.

Roderick John Freemantle  
Redelinghuys 2014.

## **Teguaan's Pool**

This is where it all started.

I was born in February 1955 in Ermelo, a small town in the Eastern Transvaal, now Mpumalanga, on the hot summer/cold winter Highveld. In my second year our family relocated to Barberton – an historical town in a picturesque setting in the Eastern Transvaal/Mpumalanga Lowveld with a backdrop of mountains, valleys, bushveld, heat and thunder storms. The area hosted a large variety of animals in abundance as it had for millions of years.

Here there were reptiles, small, huge, deadly and harmless – insects, both beautiful and intimidating, spiders to cause the fainthearted sleepless nights, mosquitoes with the most annoying nature – gold, beauty and adventure.

Barberton was once the largest settlement in South Africa thanks to the Barber brothers and their discovery of gold. Legend has it that one of the Barber brothers had passed out somewhere on the side of the road near a pub in Barberton in the 1880s and rested his head on a rock. On waking he found that his pillow was a giant nugget of gold, whereupon he raced into the hills and staked a claim. Whether the story is entirely true or not, I cannot tell.

Barberton was also known as The Daisy Town – remember Barberton Daisies – and was actually named after Henry Barber in 1884 after Barber and his cousin Fred discovered gold in the area. Rock paintings are to be found in the caves in this mountainous area, obvious evidence that there have been San people living there. Strangely enough, archaeologists have also found religious icons and grave sites which are linked to Hindu culture.

Well, one weekend, my father announced that he was taking us to a remote location not far from the town of Barberton



where I, his third child and then aged four, would be able to fish. The location was Teguaan's Pool. In my young mind this name was intriguing – unlike the usual English names I was accustomed to. It conjured up a mysterious destination which sent bolts of excitement and anticipation through my young and tender body and mind.

We proceeded out of town and through the dense bush, as it was in 1959, on one of the countless dirt roads. I could not contain myself – fishing! What was it exactly? Teguaan's Pool – it must be a special and mysterious place ... Suddenly the car came to a halt and my father exclaimed, 'Look, a black mamba!'

The mamba was the feared and dangerous alpha snake I had heard of in hushed conversations in our house where friends and guests had described death, near death, terror and other fantastic stories around this mystical but very real creature. I stretched my tiny limbs as far as I could on the back seat to peer over the shoulder of my father and looked ahead with all my might to catch sight of the snake. Then slowly I focused on it: a dark, long, lithesome creature, stretched almost across the 4 m dirt road. I was struck by its appearance – beautifully proportionate, moderate build, an endlessly tapering tail, slender neck and vaguely smiling mouth set in a long slender head, raised a metre off the ground, nonchalantly peering at this intruder on its age-old stomping ground.

I was transfixed.

Then, as the car slowly edged forward toward the snake, it came to electrifying life and seemed to 'flow' across the sand at great speed and melt off the road into the verge where it disappeared, leaving only a smooth but distinct track on the loose sand.

The snake was gone.

Little did I know then that in later years I was to capture many of these noble creatures of the reptile world and witness death, near death (including my own) and be exposed to a bizarre

report of the exhumation of graves containing mamba victims, which revealed spine-chilling results of what had taken place in the coffins. This is described later.

Although there are other noteworthy events that occurred in Barberton before we left that most wonderful place, I wish to mention only three more.

Since I was to face lions in my later life, I recall the first of the three events.

Lions were still encountered around Barberton and my father told us of a life and death struggle between one of his friends and a lioness. The farmer, apparently a large powerful man, had been attacked not far from Barberton. He had strangled the young lioness to death – a feat hitherto unheard of – and sustained grievous injuries, from which he eventually recovered. The content of the story remains with me, partly due to the story he told and partly due to an encounter of my own. He said loosely the following: ‘All I can remember are the passionless yellow beady eyes staring into my eyes as she clawed, raked and bit me. Nothing affected me as much as those eyes.’

This attack was reported in the local newspapers at the time.

The second event was the shooting of a lioness near Barberton by another friend of the family. This lion was brought to our home for us to view. I was given the ‘privilege’ of posing on the lion whilst clutching my pellet gun – the great child hunter! From that day to this, the only animal I have ever shot dead was a dassie (hyrax – or rock rabbit). I shot this animal in an attempt to procure food during the period of my military service – a hunter of animals I was never to become.

The third event occurred shortly before we left Barberton following my father as he pursued his career. I found myself one fine afternoon on the lowest terrace of our very large garden, which was unkempt and had reverted to a wild state. I was wandering about looking for ‘anything that moved’, as was my habit. There was a large piece of old cardboard lying loosely on

the veld grass. I lifted it up and thrust it to one side. A crystal clear image remains in my mind of the sight which I beheld.

There lay a large snake – it could have been two or three metres long. It was dark brown and coiled elegantly on the flattened grass, as only a snake can lie. It lifted its head and glared defensively at me. A mamba, I exclaimed to myself with hesitant excitement. Do I run or do I stay? Do I fear or do I enjoy this discovery?

I did feel an unusual joy pulse through my being and stood rooted to the spot, all fear left behind me.

I faced the snake. It lifted its head and then turned and provided me with a true vision – the grace and beauty of its movement was incomparable. It seemed like water contained in an elegant coating of loosely fitting skin – muscles drove it forward, sans legs and arms, with unimaginable efficiency. Its speed was suitable to enable its ‘escape’ from any predator. It seemed to say: Let me go and I will not fight you.

From that day on I pursued these fascinating creatures when-ever and wherever I could. I believe it has been partly to relive that curiously beautiful moment.



## **The lions in the thicket**

Since leaving Barberton, my brother and I had never returned to the district. I guess I was around seven years old when we left Barberton; we were now planning a trip back at the beginning of my 18th year.

Our intention was to tour the region as young adults, now autonomous and with our own set of wheels. This was to be a fabulous adventure! We planned our route, which included looking up old friends from school, visiting ex-farmer clients of my father (and hopefully staying on their farms), and of course collecting reptiles.

The trip went well in the first several days and it was delightful to meet up with old faces and to wander about the bushveld on the farms that were open to us. We had caught a number of spitting cobras and other snakes, including one good specimen of black mamba.

One of the farmers, whom we knew from our years of growing up in Barberton and were spending time with, indicated that there were many mambas to be found near Orpen Gate, one of the well-known entrances to the Kruger National Park. The snakes were often encountered crossing the roads. Needing no more convincing, we decided to put this locality into our plan of action. The following morning we climbed into our Volkswagen Combi and headed off in the direction of the Kruger Park.

It was quite a substantial drive and we found ourselves on the remote road leading towards Orpen Gate at around 11 a.m. It was December; by this hour, the temperature was in the 30s and the regular thunderstorms had rendered the atmosphere humid and stifling. This was not a good time to look for snakes crawling about the bush, as it was far too hot and they would be concealed in a burrow or some other suitable place. We knew, however, that mambas would often lie up in large thickets during the hot hours,

coiled, resting in a shady nook. If we walked through the bush from thicket to thicket we might have some luck.

With sticks and cotton bags tucked into our belts, we plunged into the veld, splitting up as we usually did, between 100m and 500m apart, probing each thicket as we moved forward. The bush was thick and the grass long, as was usually the case this time of year.

What one did was to approach a thicket quietly, then carefully and slowly brush aside the outer leaves and peer into the inner sanctum. One would then move into the thicket listening for the distinctive sound of a heavy-bodied snake moving off, while scanning the sandy, leafy floor and logs from old fallen trees which were inevitably strewn across the ground.

Well, it was all very exciting and we proceeded with much enthusiasm. I moved ahead briskly to a rather large thicket which I thought looked promising. There were ant bear holes all over the place, termite mounds and other obstacles I had to skirt around. As I approached the thicket in question, I pushed aside the overhanging branches and peered inward. The foliage being so dense, it was particularly dark in this thicket and my eyes needed to grow accustomed to the dim light.

I walked slowly forward towards the centre where I could gain an all-round view of the potential 'lying up' spot of a mamba. The usual logs and other obstacles were in abundance. Suddenly I became confused. I was confused as a number of the logs and other obstacles strewn about under the tree had started moving in my direction!

My hair stood up straight – I had blundered into a pride of lions!

It seemed there were between seven and eight lionesses and a male lion to my centre right. My eyes became blurred with liquid. I blinked several times to clear them. I could absolutely NOT believe what I was looking at.

I remember the tails of all the lionesses swishing backwards and forwards – each black tip flicking. They were all hugging the ground on all fours, staring directly into my face, some of them with their mouths drawn up in the type of snarl you never want to see.

The male, which was huge, and at this time probably looked larger than he really was, let out a guttural growl which sent shock waves through my body. If ever there was such a thing as a violent sound, this was it. The lion rushed at me, parting his females, then stopped and flattened himself to the ground and looked upward into my face, all the while releasing an unearthly series of deeply disturbing utterances ...

I must have been 10 to 15 paces away from the lot. One can never be prepared for such an event – and a back-up plan I did not have!

I had become incapable of thought. My body then involuntarily began to lighten itself by emptying its bowels and bladder, completely against my will of course, in preparation for flight or fight. Fight? What a laugh. It would rather be like an ant attacking a ‘herd’ of ant bears!

Flight? Yes, this seemed good, except my limbs were not capable of taking any direction from my numbed brain.

The lionesses, one by one, advanced – remaining flat on the ground and with intimidating growls coming thick and fast. The male too seemed to be getting more agitated. Every time he moved, dust would rise around him. Suddenly my legs agreed with me that if I remained there any longer, the inevitable would take place.

I had become insensible, but a spark of intelligence had inspired a slow movement backwards. It was a noisy exit; they continued to voice their disapproval and other intentions as, one foot after the other, I retreated. I fully expected the attack to come at any second and so with each horrifying moment I felt no relief. I felt the outer branches brush against my back and knew I

was about to exit the lion's den. My consciousness was so elevated that I had developed subtle sight to my rear, to the extent that I was avoiding the ant bear holes, ant heaps and the other numerous obstacles without so much as tripping or bumping into anything. I must have walked backwards for at least 100 metres, eyes fixed on the thicket, before I turned and made a lame attempt at running!

I realised that the heat of the day and the torpor of the resting lions in the extreme heat had probably saved my life. Presently I called for my brother and watched as he returned on foot far from the thicket I had just escaped from, ready to forewarn him not to repeat my experience. He came directly to the vehicle. We climbed in and drove off, without much conversation at all.

My memory of this event returned to me vividly whilst recently paging through *The Complete Book of South African Mammals* compiled by Guss Mills and Lex Hess. On page 167 there is an unusually beautiful photograph of seven lionesses and a large imposing male. I was immediately transported back to that moment some 38 years ago and felt compelled to recount this event.

## Snake bite, supper & suicide

At age 17 I had become somewhat of a young snake expert. By the term 'expert' here I mean the following: I had memorised all the Latin names and common names of all the known South African snakes, their general habits, localities, sizes and all possible relevant information surrounding each species. My main source of knowledge was *The Snakes of South Africa* by W.F.M. Fitzsimmons – an incredible work by a dedicated man. I could produce most of the line drawings from this book at will and revelled in this knowledge I had acquired.

I had captured, by then, most of the more common venomous and non-venomous snakes within the region I lived in.

We lived in Hillbrow, a bustling suburb in Johannesburg we had moved to from Natal. In my room on the seventh floor of the block of flats, I housed a number of snakes – some highly venomous – in concealed boxes and small crates on my private balcony, in my cupboards and under my bed, without my parents' knowledge. They fondly assumed I had a few harmless snakes; I had cautioned them never to tamper with the containers as the snakes could bite and leave a nasty wound – little did they know. In fact, I probably had enough deadly snakes in my room to wipe out the entire population of residents in the block of flats.

On one notable evening, my young sister Elizabeth and a friend of mine were chatting away in my room and I was, as usual, fiddling with various snakes. My friend, who had similar interests, and who was not prone to bouts of unreasonable fear, had agreed to help me with a procedure I was about to perform. I reached into the cupboard and withdrew a snake from my secret hoard – a large black Egyptian cobra (now known as the snouted cobra) and placed the crate on the floor between us. This snake had contracted a bacterial mouth infection, a very common ailment in captive snakes. The treatment was to take a cotton bud



and remove the residue from the infection, then dip the other end into a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and dab the raw tissue in the infected areas. The snake was a big one – between 1.7 and 1.9 metres in length – robust and muscular.

I was grateful that my friend was in attendance. He had agreed to ‘hold’ the snake in the acceptable grip a snake handler is trained to use. I assisted in arranging the snake’s head and neck in this grip, then proceeded to prepare my medical kit. Whilst holding my left hand in an elevated position, I pressed gently on its snout with my thumb, causing it to open its mouth, whilst keeping my fingers out of range of its formidable armoury of teeth and fangs. Treatment was proceeding as planned. After a minute or two the loose material had been removed and I was now ready to apply the hydrogen peroxide.

By this time, my less experienced friend’s grip on the powerful snake had clearly relaxed, unbeknown to (a trusting) me. As I applied the first dab of the hydrogen peroxide saturated cotton bud to the raw tissue in the snake’s mouth, the poor creature could no longer contain itself and felt this was do or die time to defend its dignity. It thrust its broad head forward toward its tormentor, i.e. me again, and clamped its jaws around my right index finger. The venom is potently neurotoxic and may ultimately cause death due to respiratory failure. An average cobra may yield up to 300 mg of venom, whereas as little as 25 mg is fatal in humans.

I felt as if the snake had pumped a pint into me! One fang penetrated my finger nail on the top and deposited a veritable pool of venom under the nail, which was later clearly visible to the naked eye. The other fang penetrated my finger above the first joint. Those who are familiar with Egyptian/snouted cobras will know that a bite from this determined snake is not a fleeting affair. It holds to its mark, forcing venom into the fang puncture wounds and overstates its welcome quite admirably – for the snake, that is.



**A fairly large snouted cobra which was making frequent visits to the farm house. It only lived about 60 m away. It was moved further away to prevent an accident.**

In the initial few shocking moments we all remained rooted to our positions. I then clamped my hand around the snake's neck and pried it loose. I can't say what my friend and sister were doing at that time – all I remember is staring at my finger, the blood – and then feeling the pain. I forced the snake back into his crate and knew I was in trouble; deadly trouble!

I kept only two ampoules of anti-venom at the time, hopelessly inadequate to neutralise the venom from such a large bushveld cobra, but it would be a help – something like using a Band-Aid for a broken arm. A short time lapsed until we eventually fumbled the snake bite kit open. I can't remember if it was my sister who retrieved the serum kit; I just remember it being in my hand. I had to treat myself as my sister was far too young and my friend was in a parlous state and far too inexperienced – as if I was a pro. Hah!

I snapped the top of the first vial of serum off and with help from my friend drew the contents into a 10 cc syringe with a large thick needle. Observing the pool of venom under my nail, I figured this was my first port of call.

I braced and performed a most sadistic act on myself. I plunged the needle into the end of my finger and drove it in and upwards until it was visible under my nail in the venom pool. Then I ‘squeezed’ the plunger to saturate the venom with serum. Due to my youth, inexperience and lack of physiological ken, it had escaped me that 10 cc of serum could not fit under my nail. That initially didn’t deter me from attempting this impossible feat. I had almost fainted from the shock of the pain.

Finally defeated, I withdrew the needle and injected the balance into the back of my hand. The second vial I injected into what I fondly thought was a vein in my arm. The situation was critical, but in my youthful state I felt calm and indestructible.

‘Come for dinner,’ commanded a voice from the dining room. Dinner? My mother had finished preparing dinner; the table was set and I, my friend and sister, were now summarily ordered to the dining table. My father was a ‘family dinner’ man; this was Sunday evening and it was TIME FOR DINNER.

Ever considerate of others, I didn’t want to panic my parents, and was frankly embarrassed at the turn of events. Besides, I didn’t want to jeopardise my snake collection. I quickly hatched a plan – so considerate, so incredibly short-sighted and almost tragic – yet brilliant, in my 17 year-old estimation.

I swore my sister and friend to secrecy. The plan was as follows. We would exit the room and proceed to dinner. Should it be noticed by my parents, I had simply hurt my finger but it was no big deal. We would have supper as if nothing had transpired in the world, conversation would be normal and no-one would ‘mention the War’. After dinner, my friend would politely leave, my sister would continue as usual and I would go off to visit a friend down the road.

What we ate I cannot tell. We talked and ate – I had no appetite. I kept my throbbing, swelling hand out of sight. I began to feel the effects of the envenomation and began to fear somewhat for my future. At last – endless last – the meal came to an end and just as the second part of the plan was to be effected, guess what?

We were asked to clear the table and tidy up.

How I managed this charade I don't know. Ordinarily after such a lapse of time, one might easily become incapacitated by such a serious envenomation. After an eternity of tidying up, we were free to go!

My route was a clear one – not to my friend up the road but to the old Johannesburg General Hospital, luckily only a few minutes' walk from our residence.

When you are 17, nurses and doctors don't necessarily consider your record of events to be solid, true and sound. I had a heck of a job convincing the nursing sister that my utterly unbelievable story was indeed true. I knew at this point that I was slowly dying and used the last of my persuasive ability finally, with success, to convince my sceptic that the sequence of events had indeed transpired as I reported them.

My symptoms and the apparent knowledge I displayed must have penetrated the nursing sister's veil of doubt. She called for the emergency doctor and attendant staff to attend to my failing body. My breathing had become extremely difficult, I had become somewhat incontinent and was now unable to walk or support myself.

Before lapsing into total paralysis, I was able to brief a wonderfully enlightened, fairly young doctor, as to my needs. '8-10 ampoules of polyvalent anti-venom,' I said, 'intravenously ... and life support if necessary!' I exclaimed in my failing moments.

I was wheeled into a narrow cubicle and the curtain was drawn shut. My head was tilted to my right and there I remained,

fully conscious, eyes staring ahead but unable to move. Of course the hospital had no serum and an emergency vehicle was sent to retrieve anti-venom, God knows where from. While I lay in this state, an explosion of activity erupted in the general emergency area. Some deadly drama was unfolding and I was still conscious enough to wonder what might be the cause.

Presently I heard the sound of activity approaching my cubicle. The curtain was thrust back open and a trolley was wheeled into the space next to mine. The doctor was standing between me and the new patient performing some frantic activity. Eventually the activity begun to subside and I thought I heard him murmur something about it being 'hopeless'. He moved aside to speak to a colleague and I heard him utter the following: 'He shot himself with a .45. The bullet entered the right temple and exited above his left ear – there is no hope.'

My staring, conscious eyes were peering into the left side of his head. I watched unmoved as small globules of brain matter and fluids dripped and slid out of the gaping hole just above his ear. I completely forgot about my predicament and felt deeply sorry for this poor man.

Finally, the serum arrived and I was ready to receive the life-saving anti-venom.

I passed out, slowly melting into darkness. I never asked about the suicide.

God knows how my parents found me. I guess my sister must have 'ratted' on me, God bless her. As for my friend, I can't remember what part, if any, he played after the event. Not his fault; I simply don't remember.

My eyes opened two days later. My mother was sitting to my right. I said, 'Hi, how did you know I was here?'

I had survived. This was not the last time.

## **Light stories ... the fainting New Zealander and the British butterfly collector**

Visitors to Africa sometimes become champions of the bushveld. Some don't, after a baptism of fire. I met Rod at school. His father, a tradesman, was drawn from New Zealand to Africa to ply his trade. I never liked his brash nature. Rod, however, had a keen sense of humour and we got on well. He was later to abuse 'substances', but while he was still whole and happy we were friends.

I decided to treat Rod to a bushveld adventure and organised a fun-filled weekend to the north of Johannesburg. Tents in our earlier days were certainly not high tech. A critter-proof, zip-up, waterproof tent with built-in ground sheet complemented by thermal sleeping bags were as foreign then as a cell phone, a laptop and Barack Obama.

We had a pup tent. A pathetic one- or (at a stretch) two-man tent, semi-prehistoric in design, of canvas material not impervious to water. No undersheet – two large flaps for a door AND HEAVY! It was the technology of the day.

We arrived at our destination, somewhere between Naboomspruit and beyond. We headed off the main road to some distant hills. It was December – the month of heat and storms.

The bushveld had been dry for several weeks and the heat was oppressive. On this hot day the drought was to be broken spectacularly. Clouds rolled in from the east as we marched through the parched landscape; with each moment they became darker and more menacing. We reached the foothills and climbed some 200 or 300 metres up the slope, seeking a suitable camp site.

Thunder rolled across the veld as lightning began to erupt from the dark, ominous God-driven clouds enveloping the

region. We were midgets under this brewing storm, which was larger than the boldest imagination. The storm was about to impose its authority on all earthbound life. As the heavens opened up, we enshrouded ourselves with the canvas tent and sat huddled together, hungry, cold and afraid as millions of cubic metres of water descended on the thirsty earth and our ill-prepared bodies. Torrents of water raced down the slope, driving silt and debris against, under and around us. A more miserable sight you could not imagine. It was pitch black as we endured nature's wrath.

We slept a little in the dying hours of the night and shivered our way into the dawn, greeting the sun with gratitude. So hot was the day that we soon dried out and dismissed our dismal introduction to the weekend.

It was steamy in the heat of the day as we crossed the hills and descended into a valley of dense bush on the east side. We found an ideal campsite – a clearing in the bush in a valley, with a stream nearby now gently flowing after the storm. This was a rocky terrain – huge boulders, rocks and stones all around, the location remote. We pitched our 'primitive' tent and explored.

Some time before dusk we made a fire. A simple meal was cooked in our camping pots and we chatted, happy and fulfilled. At this time, close to nightfall, the earth began to vibrate with life. We weren't quite prepared for the events that followed. A new storm was brewing – not a rainstorm, but a storm of nocturnal creatures impatient for the night! A dry period in the bushveld causes a retreat.

When the spell is broken by a deluge of rain, every nocturnal creature emerges rejoicing to drink, to feast and pursue primal urges with no regard for unwitting visitors.

Having consumed our basic meal, we lit a candle in the tent at dusk and prepared our blankets to sleep out the night.

Sleep? What sleep? As darkness fell, the first of our visitors appeared.

I heard a scuttling sound and a massive scorpion moved into the tent. Rod was not amused. I used our wooden tent-peg mallet to persuade our visitor to scuttle outside. Then a centipede – a purple black 10 cm or 12 cm creature with huge pincers – moved through the tent at some speed. I have never been fond of centipedes, especially when looking at their toxic biting apparatus when camping in the bush.

Next – a pitter-patter of multiple feet on the canvas tent – a silhouette of a baboon spider (the South African version of a tarantula), then more sounds on the tent and more hairy silhouettes – a few baboon spiders – hunting spiders, a couple of centipedes, other insects beautifully displayed as in the window of a horror toy shop, lit up by the candle shining through the white canvas tent. Then more scorpions in the tent; I don't mean two or three, but eight or ten! Then more baboon spiders – one, two, three, then more hunting spiders, then other insects. We paid no attention to the masses of other insects, but focused on the nightmarish ones. We were in a 'mad entomologist's' bush lab. The spiders, scorpions and centipedes were feasting. The candle-illuminated tent had drawn a zillion insects and these predators were after them.

At some point I took a more severe approach to dealing with the large and more menacing insects and arachnids entering the tent, to save Rod from a mental breakdown of some type, using our tent-peg mallet to bludgeon any threat to death as it moved towards Rod.

I resorted to this to prevent Rod running off screaming into the night, never to be seen again. No-one could have foreseen the next event. A large baboon spider slipped into the tent and moved towards Rod. The spider now nearly under him, I struck wildly with the large mallet – a 'last chance' hit before it was on or under his quivering white-lipped body. The swing of the mallet caught Rod on his knee.



I suppose you've seen how a knee jerks the lower leg up when a doctor taps you to test some reflex or the other? Well I hit him with the force of a blacksmith's hammer putting the finishing touches to the flat end of a 3 metre crowbar.

Up went Rod with his superb reflex, taking the tent with him; looking, I am sure, like a whirling Dervish in the bushveld in full dress. I'm not sure if his yell was from pain or fear of the spiders on the tent which he was now wearing on his ample body.

It took a confused, frantic 30 odd minutes to re-pitch the tent and light the candle. Soon the spiders, centipedes, scorpions and the rest were back to torture Rod. I was at my wits' end. This certainly couldn't go on all night.

Help was, however, at hand in a most unexpected form. Without warning there was movement outside the tent – loud scuffles, then grunts, and these came closer. Our pots were overturned, clanging in the crisp silence. I became a little concerned – could this be a leopard? The creature was now just outside the tent door flaps.

'Give me the spade,' I whispered to Rod. It was my only likely weapon. The spiders, etc. were now of no immediate concern – there was a new and larger menace. The creature was now still and quiet at the 'door'. I could not stand the suspense. I steadied the spade ready to thrust a sharp-edged blow into the face of the animal. I slowly reached forward and then quickly drew one flap of the tent's door aside. A large male baboon glared at us, then barked a piercing bark, baring his teeth as he rose up in surprise and bewilderment at the human ape before him.

Rod was now silent – not speechless, but out for the count! This final event had proved too much for him and he now lay on his back deeply unconscious. He had fainted! The baboons left. At last I could sleep. The insects and arachnids had free reign now. We were 'dead' to their movements.

Rod was never to accompany me again on such an outing – I can't say who was more relieved, he or I!

And now, the British butterfly collector ...

Around the same time Rod had endured his insect onslaught, I was approached by a rather serious butterfly collector from England. He had enquired at a well-known pet shop in Johannesburg (SA Pets – run by a fabulous Jewish man and his son Leon) if they knew of a guide who could take him into the nether regions of the country to fulfil one of his dreams – capturing butterflies for his collection. He had captured all possible species within Britain and many from elsewhere in the world; now Africa's butterflies were to be captured to boost his collection. His enthusiasm was unbounded. The pet shop owner knew me well and I received a call from the butterfly hunter. He and I met.

I suggested Magoebaskloof near Tzaneen. I had been there once and I was taken by the large and beautiful butterflies in the forested valleys. Having at one time collected butterflies myself, I knew a like-minded person would find himself in 'butterfly heaven' there.

We set off in his hired car. He loved everything about SA and was so terribly keen that he could hardly contain himself, bursting out of his rather sober British demeanour, like a butterfly emerging from its larval state.

We had a deal. I led him to his quarry but I would pursue my own quarry on the same trip. I asked for no fee. Fee, what was that? Helping others was such a pleasure, the thought of asking for money in return was an unknown concept to me.

On the farm we established ourselves for the two days of our sojourn. All conditions were ideal. Some rain, hot steamy valleys, grassy slopes and butterflies en masse.

This collector was a master. His nets, traps and other gadgets made him the James Bond of butterfly procurement. I

watched him for ages setting his traps, stalking specimens and launching his sudden attacks on his unsuspecting prey. More than once I beheld him charging down a grassy slope, reminiscent of a Gurkha in full flight, doing his regiment proud as he sounded his battle cry before pinning his quarry to the ground in a flowing net. He returned to England triumphant.

His trip was not all a bed of roses, however. He was to experience our ineptitude in maintaining dangerous quarry in confinement. Whilst driving through the Pietersburg district – now Polokwane – after dark at around 19h30, his headlights fell on a large puff adder emerging from the grassy verge of the road.

‘Snake,’ I shouted. ‘Pull over!’ This was our deal. We capture our quarry and he captures his. It was our turn. Fifteen minutes later we were off again. The snake was in a bag and the bag in turn was in a protective canvas rucksack behind his seat. Our butterfly ‘stalker’ was a happy man – not fazed by the reptiles. He found all events he experienced in Africa quite delightful – except for one.

Our snake bag containing the puff adder had held several reptiles before, and at least a few had defecated in the bag over time. The acidity of the previous faeces in the bag had weakened the fabric and its stitching. This large and powerful captive, fulfilling his duty to escape, forced his way through the weakened stitching to freedom. Body free of the bag, he now began to make good – as I am sure he thought – his escape. Snakes are so stealthy, quiet and patient that they can move amongst people without arousing any attention – especially in the dark.

Since our feet were unmoving and booted, the puff adder moved over our extremities without our attention being roused. Our visitor, however, was in the ‘sandals and socks’ routine and not insensitive to movement over his feet.

During one of our many conversations, he suddenly stopped speaking, then yelled a chilling cry, pulling his knees up to his ears

and jamming both feet against the dashboard on either side of the steering wheel. The car veered all over the show.

We thought he may be suffering a seizure or some other rare medical event. As the car began to slow, with him now steering it off the road into the bush, we urgently enquired, 'Are you okay? Can we help? Are you in need of medication?'

The car was nearly at a standstill. He glared at me wildly.

'The bloody snake was on my feet.'

'On your feet?' He was clearly suffering from delusion – Africa and the excitement and the heat were getting to him.

'Yes, on my feet. GET IT OUT FROM UNDER ME.' The car stalled, nose against a fence, headlights lighting up the bush ahead. I aimed my torch at the pedals below the steering column.

He was not delusional! The snake filled the area below the pedals and now began hissing loudly.

Our visitor's utterances are unprintable. I urged him to remain still as I bailed out the passenger seat and ran around to his door. He couldn't remain in his seat a second longer and thrust himself out of the open door like an animated sack of potatoes. He thumped to the ground and scrambled to a safe distance as I carefully re-captured the escapee. This time we placed it in a 'newer' bag and then in the boot of the car.

His humour returned after a short time and he mocked us while we in turn mocked his butterfly capturing activities.

His adventure was now complete. He would return to England with his impressive butterfly collection from Africa and a 'close shave story' to match.

## **The wind dries up the river or Sentenced to death by the chief**

The wind dries up the river, leading to famine, resulting in hardship, stock loss, crop failure, starvation and death.

The first I heard of this phenomenon/item of folklore was in the Hammanskraal district in the early 1970s. Hammanskraal is located north of Pretoria and can be accessed by The Great North Road which leads to Zimbabwe – Rhodesia, at the time. Anecdotally, the largest snouted cobra (Egyptian cobra as they were known then) had been captured in this district. Apparently it was 11 ft long – a true monster. The thought of such a specimen sent tingles up my spine and I knew I would be there sooner or later searching for ‘my’ 11-footer.

The day came. We were on a large farm, near where I had treated my first snake-bite victim. During breakfast a couple of years previously the house help had called the farmer and his wife to some matter of urgency outside. I was quickly summoned. There lay a young lady – in her late teens – wailing quietly on the ground under a shady tree with an impossibly tight tourniquet around her thigh.

‘A puff adder has bitten her on her calf,’ the farmer indicated in a measured voice. I moved over to her and crouched at her side. Two widely spaced fang marks were clear on her inner right calf and a pale liquid intermingled with blood was oozing out of the fang punctures on the slightly discoloured and swelling calf muscle.

‘I need to positively identify the snake before we use any serum!’ I exclaimed to the farmer. We raced to the field where she had been bitten while harvesting crops with a number of other farm hands. A small group had remained in the field

observing the reptile while awaiting further instructions from the farmer.

Well, I never caught my 11-footer in that district, ever, but that day I laid eyes on and captured the largest puff adder I had ever seen; to date I have never seen another such massive creature of this species in South Africa. I walked up to the small circle of farm hands and followed their gaze. There it lay playing dead, still hoping we couldn't see her. To be honest, I can't remember if it was 1.3 m or 1.4 m, but for a puff adder it was exceptionally large. So muscular, she was almost square across her back and down her sides, a heavy chocolate brown snake with black and sandy coloured markings, her head as large as an average hand. She had obviously fattened herself on the rodents feeding on the yearly crop and was probably several years old at this stage.

Well, it definitely was a puff adder, and I wondered if the poor young lady could survive a bite from such a large snake. Snake in tow, we arrived back at the farmhouse. I went to work, injecting all 4 ampoules of serum we had into her buttocks. This wasn't exactly the correct procedure. The injection should have been intravenous, but I was following the knowledge of the day. We raced to hospital. More serum was injected. Finally we left her in the care of the medical staff and returned to the farm. We heard from the farmer that she had been discharged two weeks later without any severe after-effects, and she had asked him to extend her gratitude to us for our help. In retrospect I suspect that the snake did not inject very much venom, as both treatments, mine and the hospital's, were actually rather inadequate. Of course there was value in our treatment; it is just that the treatment could have been a lot more efficient, but in hindsight.

Back to the large farm I alluded to.

We had offered all the staff on the farm a small reward if they could lead us to the locality of any very large snake which we

might capture, knowing full well that any 'very large snake' in that area would most likely be a snouted cobra. There was no news on the first and second days, but on the third day one of the farm hands indicated that there was a large snake living in a disused ant bear hole near the river. After questioning him for some time, it appeared, based on his description, that the snake was in fact a python and not a cobra. We thought we might like to capture the python anyway. The worker was tempted by the reward we offered, but seemed reluctant to lead us to the snake. We questioned him further, hoping to persuade him, but he was unwilling. He recounted a legend which we thought interesting. It was somewhat amusing, but would come to haunt us in a deadly surreal event a few years later in another remote part of South Africa. In his broken mixture of English and Afrikaans he told us that he could regrettably not reveal the locality of the python, even to claim his reward, as the capture of the python would be catastrophic for the region.

'Why is this?' we enquired, now deeply curious. To capture the snake, we were told, would precipitate a great wind which would dry up the river, leading to drought. There would be no water for the cattle or the crops and all the inhabitants of the district would suffer.

We found his legend captivating but woke up when he mentioned the remedy to the drought.

'To remedy the drought,' he said.

'Yes?' we enquired eagerly.

The one responsible for killing or capturing the python would have to be killed himself in order to restore the rains and the river. This would break the drought.

Charming, we thought. So I guessed we wouldn't capture the python this time.

A few years later an excursion was planned near Groot Marico, an historical locality in South Africa abounding with legends and stories. There was a 'homeland' nearby and my

brother Charles had been invited there to visit the family of a work colleague of his to capture some of the large snakes that abounded in that remote district. He and I and two visiting British citizens were set to travel together on a mini-safari to the homeland.

Our rather long journey found us in a dusty, overgrazed, vast landscape of huts and houses, dry pans, thorn scrub and grass stubble – a real outback!

We were introduced to the mother and all the family members – as guests of honour. His mother was an elegant lady, elderly, well dressed and gracious. Her modest home was spotless – even in this dusty bowl. I clearly remember the beautiful antique cabinet in her sitting room filled with beautiful china – delicate tea cups, tea pots and silver cutlery. We were served tea on a tray with this delicate china and it was beautifully and unselfishly turned out for our comfort. A mix of Africa and England. I was grateful to meet this elegant lady. Even the queen would have been taken by her elegance and beautiful china.

After tea we were shown to our room, where we prepared our sleeping bags and stored our kit.

Our host then took us bushwhacking. We weren't very elated, as the entire area was overgrazed and the bush sparse. It was early winter and bleakness was the order of the day in this land-scape. We were approaching a dry pan when I noticed there were many rodent burrows and mongoose burrows at the base of the thorn shrubs and trees.

*A good sign of a reasonably healthy ecology despite the apparent desolation*, I thought. Another few metres and a movement caught my eye, quite in the open. A huge sandy-yellow Egyptian cobra, sunning itself in the warm winter sun, was now attempting to sneak back to his disused mongoose burrow, hoping to escape our attention. A firm, thickset, glistening creature over 2 metres long – quite a specimen. As this heavy and handsome creature made its way home we easily bagged it, realising that had we not,



it would probably have met a sticky end at the hands of a cattle herders' knobkerrie sooner or later.

No wonder our host had asked us to visit – there were magnificent reptiles here. To honour us further, unbeknown to us a goat had been slaughtered for our evening feast along with an endless supply of homemade beer. Cooking the goat was not an event our English friends might have encountered in Britain. However, they were game for anything – in particular the beer. These were meat and potato men and this evening was to be their highlight after the day's capturing events. As a large fire burnt down, to the rear of the house, the coals were spread. Not the coals you would expect in a suburban barbecue. This was like 50 barbecues in one. A sheet of Victorian profile corrugated iron was laid on the coals. The goat was placed on this sheet, and then a second sheet of corrugated iron was placed over the goat. More coals were then placed on the top sheet. Our chef had now basically discharged his duties. A Gordon Ramsay event this was not!

I didn't drink alcohol and I can't remember if my brother did then either. The British contingent, however, was now in the pub. The African Open Air Bushveld Pub. They put away the porridge-like bush brew with relish and were soon nostalgic, singing 'Auld Lang Syne' among other traditional pub songs. Presently the top sheet of corrugated iron came off the goat. The meat was perfect – cooked through, tender and aromatic. We tucked in like the starving travellers we were, and it was memorable. It wasn't late when we all passed out – some from fatigue; others from the onslaught of the beer.

Perhaps an hour passed, then we woke to the sound of the two Brits vomiting desperately somewhere nearby. I am afraid their constitution was not prepared for the home brew of which they had consumed so much, and the goat to boot!

We comforted them in their abject misery before attempting sleep once more. It wasn't long before a very concerned face

appeared in our room. Our host was looking utterly shaken and afraid. He beckoned to us. We followed him outside where he spoke to us in a hushed tone. It was now cold and after midnight. He urged a figure lurking in the dark to join us. This was a relative of his who was close to some high-ranking official, who in turn was close to the chief.



‘You must leave now,’ they both uttered with urgency. ‘Some men will come later to kill you when you are asleep.’

Why? Was the obvious question.

In brief they explained. The area had been in drought for some time. Word had reached the chief that ‘these foreigners’ had captured a large snake near the dried out pan. Seeking to find a reason for the drought and its remedy, he had ‘now put two and two together’ and figured that somehow we must have captured the ‘python’ that had caused the drought. Of course the drought had begun long before our arrival, but using this weak reason and seeking a scapegoat, he obviously felt that if he could pin the blame on us he could then activate the remedy, which was to kill the one/s responsible, thereby – hallelujah – restoring the rains to the district.

‘Go NOW,’ they urged us, becoming more animated. Our informer said he had to leave immediately as, if he was found with us, they would kill him too. We knew enough about traditional superstition/folklore not to ignore the warning and were in no position to defend ourselves in any case. Our ‘saviour’ melted into the night. Within a very short while we and our ghastly ill British visitors, too, melted into the night.

Forty one years have passed since that event. I have never returned to that region. Not through fear, but through simple circumstance. I can’t say I would even know how to find the blessed place.

No doubt the rains came again, despite the fact that we were not dispatched to appease the gods.

Folklore and legends are what they are, but don’t mess with them in the wrong environment.

## **A cure for climbing**

In 1974, Hartbeespoort Dam and the surrounding Magaliesberg district was a respectable place to visit.

The dam had not yet become a bustling suburban cesspool where people trade their fast cars for fast boats on weekends and speed over blankets of algae in pursuit of a different, yet the same, fast life. I and my friends would often spend weekends there. I was drawn to climbing and the Magaliesberg had numerous valleys, ravines and perfect cliff faces for a relatively easy climb, suitable to less experienced prospective mountaineers such as us.

There was a surprising variety of animals, in particular large troops of baboons and an amazing bird life. Here one could find three or four Egyptian cobras in a day, just a stone's throw from Johannesburg, really. The valleys were secluded places which cut deep into the mountains. On the valley floor one was in a lost world with beautiful streams strewn with boulders, river stones and logs with pools one could refresh oneself in. The valley seemed tropical and abounded with ferns and tall trees reaching for the sky high above them between the two cliff faces. As one walked up the valley it felt as if no-one else had ever been there.

On a weekend in 1974, John and I decided to 'take a walk' in one of the valleys. We had walked for perhaps an hour and the cliffs had become steeper and higher in this narrow gorge. I cannot say how high they were, but possibly 150 metres – maybe more, maybe less. John was from England, where he had been a scaffolding foreman. For him, heights meant nothing – like walking on the edge of a pavement. He was game for a climb.

It looked like a fairly easy climb, although definitely a challenge; quite achievable, I thought. One needed to be careful but we started up the cliff like a pair of rock rabbits, easily finding hand and foot holds as we ascended. Soon the energising climb

began to reveal views into the valley and the cliff faces left and right, and these were magnificent.

There were ledges like large steps at intervals; each time we reached a ledge we would sit, chat and take in the view, then aim for the next ledge higher up. Climbing can be deceptive, as I had found once in the Drakensberg. One looks up, sees the next ledge and then not too far after that another; then it appears as if the top of the cliff is right after the last ledge. This is not always the case.

Climbing had now become a bit more challenging, but not yet impossible. We had no climbing gear but even if we had, we wouldn't have known how to use it. We also had no means of communication, and not a soul in the world knew where we were except ourselves. We reached another ledge. I stared down onto the unforgiving boulders and logs many metres below. This was no place to fall. Up to the next ledge ... this was really difficult and dangerous. Then the next ledge ... Almost at the top, I thought, with adrenaline starting to surge through my body, along with the secret hope that all would work out.

When we pulled ourselves onto the final ledge, the nightmare opened up. The height, the view, the scenery, the adventure, the exhilaration ... all faded. The beautiful cliff had become an enemy. I felt a low-key panic in the pit of my stomach as the deadly situation slowly became obvious. We were stranded with no communication on a ledge we could not descend from (for the totally uninitiated: there comes a stage where, although being able to reach a point, one simply cannot retreat). Movement upwards was totally impossible as the last cliff face was sheer, with an overhang.

What faced us was this:

no possibility of going up; no possibility of going down. To the right the ledge tailed off to nothing. To the left was an overhanging rock face protruding over the impossibly deep gorge below. I don't think I had ever been so afraid!

To escape one would have to find whatever grips there were for one's fingers on the bulge of overhanging cliff face, forcing one out and over the chasm below and to inch one's way around to where? We could not see beyond.

Clearly we couldn't stay there forever. Night would come and then what? We had no protective clothing and to fall asleep on the ledge was not an option, as the slightest wrong movement would send us plummeting over the edge. I recall looking down once more, and felt as if a magnet was gently coaxing me over the edge. I shut my eyes and forced my back against the cliff face. John was a little concerned, but because of his familiarity with high places, not yet quite in the state I was in. We agreed that if we did not attempt the bulge, there was no hope for us.

John decided to go first.

He held on to what seemed impossibly tiny protrusions from the rock, his fingers and knuckles white as he inched himself around the bulge, sometimes with both feet hanging and dangling in mid-air. If there was a dead end, I thought ...

There were no tears, no regrets; just a deep feeling of loss and helpless finality.

John disappeared. I held my breath and heard him say, 'We can get out on this side.' He was safe. I wasn't. With a supreme fit of determination I moved up to the bulge, grabbed on to the rocky protrusions he had used and, trembling, moved inch by inch, numbed into deep attention and concentration, mind completely absent. I did not even feel my feet dangling below me as I rounded the bulge with little comprehension and found my feet settling on the ledge on the other side.

We scrambled up a steep grassy slope, over the ridge and on to the top. For ten minutes we walked, ran, jumped and laughed. This was our elated knee-jerk reaction to the unspeakable fear we had come out of. Everything was electric and beautiful all around.

I stopped and thought, Why does life not always look so wonderful? Must I nearly die to see properly?

I obviously had a short memory. Some months later I returned, this time alone. I enjoyed being alone. For me it was wholesome and I didn't really feel alone at all. I walked one of the gorges. The memory of my last climb returned, but not as a deterrent, just as an experience. Many times before I had climbed these rock faces without any real incident and mostly I had been by myself. This time I was careful, considerate towards myself. I chose a fairly easy passage up the cliff. There was a deep fissure all the way from the valley floor to the top. I glanced up repeatedly on my ascent. I could not look behind nor below me, as clinging into the fissure it was difficult to twist one's head right around without letting go too much.

The climb remained fairly easy and I kept glancing upwards to see how much further I had to go – such folly. The gods must have chuckled at this point. The height of the cliff must have been well over 100 metres. To the left and right of the fissure were steep flat rock faces; they were quite sheer. This didn't bother me as I had taken the easy route – up the centre, over and out. I was feeling good.

The climb became a little difficult towards the top and I was now, once again, in a position where I could not retreat. When I glanced up again to gauge how many metres were left, I was drawn to a sound and activity that welded me to the spot. Bees, millions of bees!

My heart sank. There was a beehive right in my path, in the fissure, and they were milling about in a cloud directly above my head. I knew I was mildly allergic to bee stings – that is, one bee sting, not a million bee stings. Stupid, stupid, stupid, I thought. If the bees stung me I would peel off the cliff. At least, I thought, I wouldn't die from a bee sting!

Life often presents multiple choices in a situation. In this case I had only two. Left or right, and neither was a good choice. In any case, either side would have taken me fairly close to the bees. I found myself in the state I had been on the previous

occasion, with an unenviable fear and with an uncertain future. I don't know why I chose left, but I went left. I only knew each move just before I made it, but managed to cling on. My concentration was so acute that the bees became of almost no significance. Their buzzing increased and once again they began to dominate my considerations, swarming around in the summer heat.

I can't remember reaching the top, but felt myself scramble over the lip, where I sat dazed for a period. I had been cured of climbing!





## **The veil of individuality is lifted or Universal consciousness revealed**

Philosophies and religions the world over deliver a message of blissful connectedness – being one with all within an all-pervading consciousness, the finest of all – beyond elements and emanating from that which is variously referred to as God, Allah, Brahman and so on. It is a beautiful message when apprehended by the mind, and indeed seems to penetrate the mind to a realm where the very mind has no place to contaminate this crisp and taintless arena. It is, however, all-consuming, incomparable and real beyond the wildest stretch of one's imagination when experienced.

The reason, it seems, that many people argue about unity – 'being one' – and that different religions claim precedence one over the other, is that clearly none of those who are arguing has been in a state of utter unity. This is clear – at least to me – because once having experienced this stateless state, there is no argument and no difference between all or any.

No wonder the wise sit in that fine abode of peaceful tranquillity, untouched by the rigours of all those on the left and right, gently smiling on the eternal play of creation, ever watchful, extending a subtle hand of compassion to all who finally wish to enter and rest in the truth of universal grace which lies at the core of all beings!

One of the events which 'introduced' me to a true understanding of untainted unity occurred in my earlier years. This experience caused me to 'take up the hunt' for the underlying cause of creation and its expression, which we currently understand as our life and the world around us. During my 15th year I was 'imprisoned' in the city of Johannesburg. After previously being raised in the wilder regions of South

Africa, my father's employer transferred him to Johannesburg. Living in Hillbrow in an apartment was a vile shock to me. I was used to looking out as far as the eye could see, with all of nature in my view. I would walk to whatever destination my eyes fell on, unrestricted. Hillbrow, a bustling metropolis at the time, and its high-rise apartments, seemed like a prison. Small rooms, small balconies, people everywhere, traffic, noise, greed, everyone so terribly busy – they appeared robotic. I felt crushed by the weight of ignorance and confinement of what I beheld.

I withdrew for a while and consoled myself with observing and capturing butterflies in Joubert Park, and making up a macabre collection of these creatures pinned to a board on the wall above my bed. They were correctly named in English and Latin and I stared at this colourful 'graveyard' with no real satisfaction each afternoon after school.

It wasn't long before I found a route out of Johannesburg. I realised one could 'hitch' a lift, requiring no cash, and could simply go anywhere in this manner. I studied a map of South Africa and read a little about the regions – north, south, east and west, the climatic conditions, occurrence of animals, reptiles and birds in these localities.

Early in my 16th year I had experimented with short outings to Olifantsfontein and Irene, quite remote in those times, and progressed to Warm Baths. I was now ready for the big one – the Limpopo River on the then Rhodesian border. Zimbabwe was not in our vocabulary in 1972, let alone the shameful events that were being acted out there which reflected man's lower nature.

Shortly before one school holiday I had arranged an alibi, having my parents believe I would be staying with a friend for ten days.

I packed for my trip. I had a few South African Rands, which at the time was sufficient to buy emergency provisions. For nourishment I had packed a box of Pronutro, a breakfast cereal

which would be my staple diet for the entire 10 days, and a change of clothing, all stuffed into a canvas rucksack.

I took my usual route hitchhiking out of Johannesburg, and to my surprise was soon hurtling towards the far north and my destination, having been given a ride by a man in his late twenties or early thirties intent on breaking the South African road speed record. His odd conversation, utterly about himself, quite escaped me and I responded as best I could when at intervals his conversation seemed to call for a response. That afternoon he dropped me off in Messina (now called Musina), the border town between South Africa and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. I wandered into the caravan park on the outskirts of Messina and paid 50c to use the shower, etc. and to stay there for the night. I slept on the ground quite happily, unaware that this might have been regarded as a hardship of any type. I ate Pronutro, just a little with water, and was satisfied. I wasn't here to feed my body, but to discover all that lay before me – everything else came very much second.

On rising at around 4 a.m. I sat out the last of the darkness, then walked north towards the Limpopo River – a large river which is the border between South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). A jovial farmer stopped and offered me a lift. We travelled along a dirt road north east towards the river which was on the way to his farm. I alighted near the Limpopo and watched him drive off, waving as he disappeared in the dust. I walked to the riverine verge and was swallowed by a fairyland of fever trees, twisted roots exposed on the banks, dense bush and utter quietness. As one broke through the riverine bush, there was a drop down to the river bed. Here one gazed across the vast expanse of river sand to Rhodesia. It was a drought year and water trickled from pool to pool on the Rhodesian side of this vast riverine beach. For a brief moment I wondered why one needed a passport to cross an imaginary border linking two parts of the same continent which had been there since the beginning of time, but I couldn't be bothered with the nonsense of it all.

I walked and walked – there was no destination. I travelled east and stopped only when dark hampered my passage forward. Once again I ate Pronutro for supper, mixed with river water. Immediate hunger and thirst satisfied, I turned my attention to sleep. Using my hands I carved a bed into the sand midway between South Africa and Rhodesia, with sand for a pillow and sand for a mattress. I was soon asleep. On waking, I was amazed to find numerous animal spoor around me. Various animals had visited me in the night, walking up to my sleeping form, wondering no doubt what the strange shape and smell was. I did not try to identify the tracks. Those days saw antelope, hyena, leopard, elephant, lion, jackal, porcupine, crocodile, hippo and many others wandering this ancient river bed. That night and nine others I was part of them all. No animal harmed me.

One morning I walked away from the river to some rocky hills I had spied in the distance to my right. Clusters of huge boulders, closely fitting like an ancient geological puzzle, crevices and caves, creepers and trees grew up and through, around and between. I saw many snakes on my approach and around the base of this remote rocky outcrop. A cobra, striped bellied sand snakes, horned adders, a mamba sunning itself, a young python, a beaked snake – there were so many. They all melted into the rocks, grass, shrubs, vines and trees at speed – then a rock monitor, lizards with beautiful stark colours and a host of mammals. I climbed the rocky outcrop to the top. All the creatures shied away, concealing themselves from the pale, noisy intruder. I reached the pinnacle and sat on a large exposed boulder.

Here I could survey the surrounding bushveld – Lord of the Manor!

Now there was not an animal in sight. All had concealed themselves from my imposing and potentially threatening presence. As I sat quietly observing, I found myself slipping away

from the confines of my ordinary mind with its thoughts, and indeed my body. I was not overtly aware of this occurrence.

Presently there was no confinement to the locality of my usual self; instead, I was widely distributed in a fine layer intermingled with all around me, as if I was not different from every or any object, be it what it was. Nature had embraced me and stripped me of my singularity. I was no longer 'me'. Like the bush I just 'was'. Throughout this wide uninterrupted union with all around there was a miraculous eruption of life, as if all the creatures that had hidden were breathed back into existence.

Antelope, mongoose, squirrels, monitor lizards, lizards, the odd snake, elephant shrews, skinks – all began to go about their business. I was invisible, I was no threat, I did not exist. I was indeed dancing in tune with the rhythm of nature, and my mortal imposition had, for the time being, been relegated to the junk heap of individuality that it belonged to.

At one delightful moment a crag lizard took refuge under my slightly cupped hand. It peeped out and, seeing all was clear, continued its hunt for insects. I was its shelter, not its enemy. In the words of Mozart: *'What a delight, I cannot tell.'* This was a true symphony of consciousness played in the concert hall of nature.

When I 'awoke' from this natural lightness of being, I wandered back to the river. My life had been irrevocably changed.

## **Escaping military justice – the inadvisable way**

Like all the young men of the day, I was conscripted.

I had chosen the Air Force Gymnasium and was accepted. In the year of my intake, one year of military service was compulsory. During that period you were ‘state property’ and they did not look after their property very well as a rule.

The South African fighting machine was, however, an efficient one – largely due to the nature of its people – good soldier stock. Rommel was reported to have said: ‘Give me 500 South Africans and I will conquer the world!’

Our basic training was tough, but some of us were tougher than the training. After a full day of physical training, drilling, shooting practice, lectures, etc. – 5 a.m. to 5 p.m., I took a dedicated group of souls for additional training from after supper to 10 p.m. at night. We were as fit as Spartans, could run any distance asked of us and just laugh it off in the heat of the summer sun.

I was talkative – perhaps too much so, as I was chosen to represent my squadron in debating. Yes, we had a debating society in the military, and in my squadron I was it! A great debating competition was in the offing and my OC gave me my subject – ‘Culture’. As it turned out, the competition was not really a debating competition, but a one-man dialogue intended to convince the audience and judges of the merits of your subject; according to one’s ability, points were awarded. The highest point scorer naturally won.

At 19 years of age, in the military, the topic ‘Culture’ somehow didn’t fit well, considering the ‘raw’ environment we found ourselves in. In order that I may practise in a proper environment, our OC commanded most of the members of the squadron to sit in a hangar so that I could practise on them.

‘Culture’ – young troops – South Africa in 1973 – you might as well have asked me to present a lecture on twelve ways to knit a garment, or pattern-making for the femininely inclined! The troops viewed my practising on them as a violation of their ‘human rights’ and I received more threats from them as a result than one who had ‘ratted’ on a mafia family.

At the outset I sought help from my brother-in-law Klaus. He and my sister Leslie had done a fine job providing me with material that formed almost the entire content of my ‘debate’. They were both more than capable of such a task, as they were given to studies of a higher nature. I was grateful.

On the night of the competition, attended by all the military brass, troops and families, it was a grand evening. I came second, although I apparently scored the highest marks of the competition at the trials.

The end of our basic training was near. I was to receive my stripes as a full corporal. Not a ‘noble’ rank, but at least a reasonable achievement for one in national service. There were two weeks to go before our passing-out parade, which is roughly equivalent to graduation day at university. We were granted a weekend pass – the last one before this, our moment of glory.

The weekend began on Friday at 17h00 and ended at 23h59 on Sunday – the bewitching hour. The consequences of returning late or not at all were dire: detention barracks, a deeply unpleasant military prison; losing your rank or pending rank and having a miserable rest of your military service, dishonour and all the usual stuff.

The weekend arrived and we were off. Allowing troops out on a weekend after so much time in concentrated training was like releasing a testosterone charged stallion into the field of life. Anything could happen and it usually did.

Four or five of us had planned an outing in the bush. This was to be a weekend to end all weekends. Total free rein – food,

booze, music (I don't know what happened to women) and freedom!

We partied, braaied, slept and revelled. All good things come to pass, however and Sunday morning arrived, except for one small oversight ... it was Monday morning!

How do you lose one entire day when there are only two in a weekend?

My dilemma was substantial. I would lose my stripes, be charged and spend time in DB, a fate to be avoided – and disappoint my family, especially my father, who was somewhat proud of my moderate achievements. The pendulum had swung – from the highs of revelry to its sombre opposite. I was mortified.

Find a way out became my mantra. There had to be a legitimate excuse I could present. The military, however, had heard it all – every excuse in the known world, and more. No glib talk in this place – it had to be real.

I hated my plan. What could be more real than a snake bite? I thought. Clearly such an occurrence could only be an accident? Why else would one get bitten by a snake? Well, to work.

Now, I could not allow myself to get bitten by one of our elapids (cobras, mambas, etc.) or a puff adder or gaboon viper – might as well throw myself under a bus. I had limited choices. In our collection I had a large mole viper and two night adders. Neither of these snakes is known to cause death by envenomation, but symptoms can be alarming. I ruled out the mole viper as the visual symptoms of a bite from this snake would not be convincing enough. (I had been bitten by one before by 'real' accident and its bite is considered to be one of the most painful of all snake bites.) A night adder it would be.

My brother Charles had been bitten by a large night adder a few years before and was hospitalised. His arm had swollen dramatically, his fingers had swollen to the extent that they could



hardly fit on his hand and his hand was blown up out of all proportion. There was discolouration to boot! PERFECT.

Reflecting on my brother's symptoms, I thought they were a little extreme. I should try to 'tone down' the envenomation.

There were two night adders, a smallish one of around 20 cm and a massive one (for a night adder, that is) of about 60 cm.

I would start with the smaller one. I had the presence of mind to place some ice on my wrist for a few minutes to act as a local anaesthetic. I removed the snake and assisted it to bite me deeply and effectively – OUCH!

I placed the snake in its enclosure, sat back and waited. Was there pain? Yes. Swelling? Yes. But after an hour I was unconvinced. Not dramatic enough, I thought. At that point I should have taken my chances with the military! As I mentioned elsewhere, wisdom eluded me in my youth.

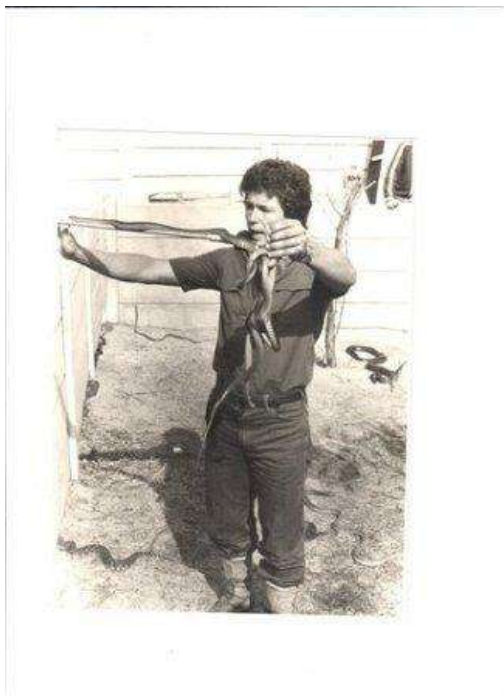
Now it was the turn of the big night adder. Ever mindful of my brother's utter despair and violent symptoms after his bite, I concocted a plan. I taped a strip of cardboard 1 cm x 2 cm to the bite site and again applied ice to my already swollen wrist. I retrieved the big snake, steadied, aimed and pressed his mouth down on my wrist – half on the cardboard and half on my flesh. The night adder, however, had not read the script and lurched forward, burying both fangs above my ice anaesthetic and the cardboard.

My plan was elevated to a level beyond my intentions. I boxed the snake, sat back and stared at my throbbing wrist. Did it swell? Most certainly. Was it painful? Boy, oh boy, was it painful! This was my cue to pack up and go.

I had prepared a sling and managed to wear it in an untidy and dishevelled way that no self-respecting nurse would ever accept. On arrival at the base I put on my best 'I have been attacked' face and within minutes medics were rushing me to the military hospital.

I spent a painful, swollen, miserable four days in the hospital.

I was awarded my stripes, my family attended the ceremony. They never knew what had taken place ... and I never told them. It was worth it all to see my parents watching me on the parade ground.



## **The prisoner and the loo**

During one's military training one might be asked to carry out duties of any nature, as I found out. Even young men conscripted for military training could be dangerous and evil. I was summonsed to our sergeant's office one morning.

'Sterzel', he said, 'I have a job for you.'

'OK,' I said.

An extremely violent and dangerous young man – one of our 1974 intake – had been absent without leave (AWOL). He had been captured some two months previously and interned in a detention barracks unit in a remote locality in the Karoo. Two non-commissioned officers had been sent to collect him and escort him back to Valhalla, our mother camp in Pretoria, where he would be tried and serve time in detention barracks. Somewhere on the journey back he had overpowered both of these officers, had almost killed one, incapacitated the other and escaped. He was recaptured and was now back at the facility awaiting transfer for a second time.

As a result, I suppose, of a reputation I had earned, I had been singled out as one who could return him to our base without incident. Indeed, I stood for the 'truth' and would never back down when facing an injustice, regardless of the consequences. This I suppose was the basis of my being chosen.

At my briefing we were given all necessary information on the prisoner – his background – not great; his violent tendencies, his strength, his disregard for the law and human life. We had also been privy to the injuries his last two guards had sustained. Our orders were to proceed to the base in the Karoo and bring him back.

Since the trains we were to travel on were civilian trains, we were not to be armed with firearms, but bayonets only. These huge blades are arguably more intimidating than our standard

issue 9 mm side arms in appearance, especially since the bayonets had to be drawn at all times while escorting him. He would be handcuffed to me and my assistant throughout the journey – cuffed to my left arm and to the right arm of my assistant. We were to defend ourselves using our bayonets in the event of an escape attempt. These were our orders.

Being cuffed to him meant cuffed dinners, cuffed loo and cuffed sleeping. Only one of us would sleep at a time. At no time was only one of us to guard our prisoner. We were both to be there at all times.

Actually, this was some sort of boon to us. Such an adventure! We looked forward to our ‘mission’ and I frankly couldn’t wait to meet our prisoner.

We were in our ‘step outs’ – our best military attire, smart, neat, crisp and clean with bayonets on our belts. We loved our bayonets. Boys love their toys.

For two troops this train trip to a remote part of the Karoo was like being in the Hilton. Food, food and more food cooked by a real chef – sleep, rest and the gentle rocking of the train – what a delight.

We prepared ourselves for the prisoner’s handover to us before disembarking from the train, discussing between ourselves how we would deal with this man if he tried his attack and escape routine with us. We were led to the guardhouse and laid eyes on our prisoner.

He was a thick-set young man, stocky, strong, with dark eyebrows, eyes set deep into his skull, a shock of black hair and a broad smile, a quick talker, convincing and dangerous, height around 1.75m. I felt quite proud. My very own prisoner – what a novelty!

And I was going to do my job. I was just 19. A few years before I would have been a young teenager reading about such an event.

I eyed him keenly. He returned my gaze. I think he sized me up quickly. I was not a violent man and I think he knew this. One thing he could perhaps not have known is that I stood for what was good and proper – the Law, that is, and it is under these dictates that I would be sure to succeed.

Handcuffed, we boarded the train on our return journey. I briefed our prisoner and he was under no illusion as to our orders and what would become of him if he attempted a second escape.

We spoke a lot on the first part of our return home. At supper we escorted him to the dining car and had a delicious but awkward meal. Try eating while handcuffed to someone while he also tries to eat! We got by.

Other travellers on the train eyed us warily – goodness knows what they thought seeing these young men acting out such a surreal event in their midst.

We returned to our carriage to prepare for the night. This was the dangerous time. The idea was that one person would be awake if the other needed a little sleep and vice versa. Before long I needed the loo. We had been briefed about him going to the loo, but not about us going to the loo. My pride had not allowed for a loo visit which included him and my assistant. I needed a number 2, not a number 1, which I might have used the window for. Well, that was that! He was not coming with me.

I handcuffed him to a railing on the double bunk with my assistant handcuffed to his usual arm. One loo was nearby; the other in the next carriage. When we had boarded the train on our return journey I had noticed an OUT OF ORDER sign on the loo closest to us. Out of order or not, I was going to try it – even if it could not flush, I thought, as I needed to be back as quickly as possible. I opened the door of the loo and peered inside. Everything looked fine. I walked in and shut the door behind me. It was against orders leaving the prisoner alone, and I had now left my post.

The loo flushed! I tidied myself, washed my hands and would now hurry back. Hurry back? There was no way to open the door! The opening mechanism had been removed, probably for repair – hence the ‘out of order’ sign. I was trapped in the loo.

These loo doors were so secure one could simply not get out. I should know; I tried. Nobody heard my calls over the sound of the train hurtling through the Karoo. Now my mind started working ten to the dozen. What if our prisoner uses his persuasive talk, asking my assistant to release him for a moment, feigns illness or asks if he can go to the loo as well? Without me there he might overcome my assistant, injure or kill him to escape – then what? I would have failed in my duty and the consequences were unthinkable. I pulled my bayonet and had one last attempt at opening the door. I then turned my attention to the small window. Oddly enough, the window was very easy to break open. I removed the window and placed it next to the toilet bowl and peered out into the dark, the wind rushing over my face and head as the train hurtled through the Karoo.

I don’t know how fast it was going, but it was very fast. I had no intention of using the window to escape as this would be suicide. Then suddenly I noticed them – vertical hand rails all along the outside of the carriage, each one spaced about 1.20 or 1.50 metres apart. They were in reach of one another. This was now becoming a little too much like a weak script in a bad Western movie. With the train hurtling through the ‘Wild West’, I was now going to become a stunt man, standing in for the actor who was far too sensible to put his life at risk.

If the situation had not been potentially so serious, I would never have dreamed of performing the move I was about to perform – not in my wildest dreams. One vertical rail was fairly close to the loo window. I thrust one arm through the window and then squeezed my head and remaining shoulder through the opening. My protruding hand clutched at the rail. My desire to return was becoming urgent, as with each inch by inch movement

forward I imagined our prisoner overcoming the guard in our room. So I proceeded.

My fear of squeezing through the window and hanging on to the first railing was only minutely less than the fear of our prisoner escaping. The wind threatened to blow me off the side of the train as my second hand closed around the railing and I pulled my body through. As my boots came through the window, my body dropped with a lurch and I slid down the rail a little, my feet almost hitting the ground rushing past below me. I pulled myself up, secured a foothold on the second railing and hung there for a few moments, heart pounding and hyperventilating.

Thank God I had an incredibly strong grip. There were a lot of rails between the loo and our carriage, and I began slowly transferring myself from one rail to the next. This was not an easy task and the fear was intense all the way as I sought to survive this ordeal.

I kept wondering if I could hold on as I reached ahead of me, each time seeking the safety of the next rail. Each lunge out into the rushing wind in the dark was heart stopping. Our carriage room was 3 rooms down from the loo. There were about thirteen rails in all. Blinds were drawn on all the windows so there was no looking in. At the third window I knocked frantically on the glass. Nothing happened. I knocked again – this time calling. According to the two inside, they thought I was in the passage knocking and calling and thought it really odd that the sound seemed to be coming from outside – that I should be calling and knocking in the first place. I knocked, even louder, and shouted for the window to be opened. Presently the blind was drawn up and if I hadn't been in such a state I would probably have collapsed laughing at the look on the four saucer-sized eyes in the cabin, staring without belief at my face pressed against the window. They could not comprehend what I was doing there or how I had got there, and I don't blame them.

My assistant slid the window open and I gripped hold of the window frame with one hand, then the next – I was freezing at this time and found it difficult to hold on, and then pulled myself over the frame, going down head first on to the floor. They were speechless for a while. They had no idea there were railings on the side of the train and wondered what super-human feat had been performed that brought me to the window.

I, too, was speechless.

It took me a full 40 minutes to recover before I could stand and transfer the prisoner's cuff from the bed post to my wrist. It occurred to me that my prisoner might have thought that I had performed this antic so that he would be aware of my most unusual abilities, thereby indicating to him that any attempt to escape would have been quite foolish on his part.

He didn't try in the slightest to escape his captors after that.

Our captive was handed over to the military police in Pretoria and we never saw or heard of him again. It occurred to me some time later that this was a job for the military police; I wondered why on earth we had been chosen in their place. I left it at that.



## **A premonition, a death, the clairvoyant**

I wasn't looking for a career. I wanted to add to my experience in the world of nature and its various offshoots – both in the field and in elementary science. This job was just up my alley. Employment at the South African Institute for Medical Research. Here we would take care of the horses that were being immunised against multiple snake venoms in the production of anti-venom against a snake bite. Yes – 'snake serum' is horse antibodies. Once a horse, having received increasing doses of multiple venoms, had developed immunity to these venoms to a pre-determined level, we would draw around 16 pints of blood from the horse and the 'serum', white blood corpuscles, would be separated from the red. The specific anti-venom component of the white blood was separated from the balance of the white blood corpuscles in pig intestines in water at a temperature of 4 degrees Centigrade, flowing over the intestines. The larger anti-venom particles remained in the pig intestines and was the crude serum. This terribly simple description of the early process naturally gives one a very rough idea. We had other duties, including euthanising horses with a heavy calibre gunshot.

The one who trained me was to become a close friend who would later lose his life tragically on one of our 'safaris'.

Johan was such a nice man. A keen photographer, he loved hiking, the outdoors in general and was fond of all creatures.

He came from the Karoo and spoke fondly of his early days in this special landscape that covers a significant part of South Africa. In particular he spoke of the mountains in the region where he had been raised and said there was a black leopard in these mountains that he would one day photograph.

Before long we were sharing an apartment in Yeoville. This was a two-bedroomed affair with bathroom, kitchen and a modest dining room.

Most weekends we headed out of Johannesburg as far as we could manage and spent our time hiking – Johan photographing anything that moved and the endless scenery; generally indulging in a healthy wholesome two days. Johan was raised Afrikaans, but spoke English well. I, in turn could speak Afrikaans acceptably well.

The first premonition came one unexpected Sunday morning. Jehovah's Witnesses would prowl the suburbs and 'flatlands' (the apartment blocks) looking for likely converts. There was a knock on the door and I beheld a lady and a gent – Jehovah's Witnesses – wishing to 'speak with us'.

I was philosophically inclined and would entertain any discussion regarding the esoteric, no matter the angle it was presented from. Some way into the conversation Johan suddenly blurted out a question which he had been deeply contemplating, apparently unaware of the nature of the gentle 'argument' between myself and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

'Can you tell me what happens when you die?' he asked out of the blue. We stopped in our verbal tracks. They attempted a (lame ) response but he was unconvinced. They promised to seek a more definitive answer from their 'superiors' and would return in three weeks with the appropriate information. That suited us fine, as we had planned outings for the next two weeks.

The usual active week on duty greeted us at the South African Institute for Medical Research. It was not all plain sailing at the institute. Our senior was a Scotsman who, I am sure, was a decent man when asleep or unconscious, but in his waking state I found him as pleasant as barbed wire.

The horses often developed large abscesses on their necks where the venom was injected and these we had to lance, clean and treat. The poor horses obviously endured pain and regularly attempted to break free, kick us, bite us and we got knocked around a fair bit. They did not like the injections of venom either. I know most humane citizens would view the treatment of the

horses as barbaric, but if any such person or a family member ever lay dying from snake bite, I doubt they would have turned away the life-saving serum the horses ‘supplied’ at their unfortunate expense.

Friday was upon us and we packed our tent, clothing, equipment and headed off. Our destination was some remote place near Ellisras.

Late on Saturday I suggested we camp in a pass on the old Ellisras road. There were some beautiful cliffs on one side of the pass and a magnificent broad stream running at the foot of the cliff, well wooded, with sandy beaches and vibrating with life. Creatures of all types moved through this riverine paradise; 35 years ago, not much disturbed them.

Being here took me back to a time during my military training when one cool autumn evening I had captured 24 puff adders on the short stretch of road nearby. Autumn/early winter is puff adder mating season and the males criss-cross the African landscape in search of a mate. A very venomous snake, probably responsible for most snake bites in Africa, the puff adder reaches an average adult length of 1 metre or so, but has a thick heavy body, a large triangular head and massive fangs. The effects of its venom are most distressing; amputations of limbs or extremities in bite victims are not uncommon.

The 24 puff adders were for venom collection and they were to spend Friday night in an apartment with me. My bed in the apartment was low – just off the ground.

I was tired that late Friday night on arriving back in Johannesburg from camp. The large cardboard box of puff adders was placed in my room and I placed a heavy dictionary on top of the box so that none of its occupants could escape and pay me a visit in my sleep. I then dumped my kitbag, stripped and soon sank into a deep slumber.

I awoke early the next morning and adjusted my eyes to the light streaming through the window – and beheld wall to wall

puff adders! The heavy book had partly collapsed the lid in and the puff adders, still responding to their age-old instinct to mate, had climbed out one by one to continue their rudely interrupted pursuit of a mate. I wonder just how many times they must have slid over my head and body as they toured the room over and over again. Only one lay curled up on the bed. The rest were lying all over the room and not one was under the blankets. That woke me up in more ways than one.

We set up camp on a sandy beach under some overhanging branches. That day now nearing a close, we decided to take a dip in the river in our costumes and then climb up the cliff, ascending from ledge to ledge, which stepped all the way up to the top of the cliff. The cliff faced the setting sun. Johan was, as usual, armed with his camera and the scenery was excellent for him to photograph.

While we were sitting on a wide ledge near the top, an unmistakable sound grew ever louder as the fast moving body of a large snake came directly towards us through the dead leaves and grass. The snake had not seen us yet and was on his way home after a day of hunting. As it passed near us, I laid eyes on the biggest black mamba I had ever seen, or have seen since.

One should not be capturing a mamba in a bathing costume and without any equipment, but what the heck? I wasn't letting this prize off lightly! I snatched at its tail and succeeded in fixing my hand on the last 30 cm of its massive body. The snake was around 4 metres long.

The capture was far from easy. It turned on me immediately and I had to dodge its strikes at my legs and mid-body several times. I managed to back up a section of cliff to escape his repeated retaliatory attacks. Johan in the meantime now had worthy cause to make good use of his camera. The photo reveals the situation I was in without further explanation being necessary.

Down we climbed, carrying our prize proudly.



### **Dagger-like teeth of a puffadder**

It is a strange phenomenon this human 'conquest' over 'lesser' creatures. One I have contemplated for many years.

We returned to Johannesburg. This most incredible specimen was temporarily housed at a friend's home in Pretoria, in a suitable enclosure in an outhouse on his parents' premises. My Pretoria friend's mother was to feature on the final stage of Johan's short life.

Encouraged by the weekend, we briefed all those who were to accompany us on our next outing – to the same location, of course.

Jumbo (his nickname), my friend from our days in the military, was to accompany us. He was one of the dedicated trainees who had joined me for extra PT during basic training. He was training to be a mechanic at this stage, a tall man of 6 foot 6 or 6 foot 7 and as strong as an ox. Other members of the party were my older brother Charles, my younger brother Stuart and of course Johan.

We were to use Charles's V-8 Ranchero truck to transport us and our equipment to our destination. Two days before the weekend, the Ranchero developed engine trouble. Jumbo came to the rescue, or almost rescue, but despite his best efforts couldn't repair the engine in time. My own vehicle was out of commission so Johan suggested we use his vehicle, even though we and our equipment would hardly fit.

Friday was once again upon us and we embarked on our expedition at a snail's pace in the overloaded Opel, picking up Jumbo on our way through Pretoria. Later that evening we had progressed well when beyond Vaalwater one of the tyres developed a puncture. It was now late and chilly. We made a fire at the side of the road. Johan had no spare tyre.

My brother Charles, against all odds, waved down a vehicle driven by a local farmer, who happily took brother and flat tyre to his farm, repaired the tyre and brought him back to the stranded party. Such generosity of nature! We were off again – now near midnight. Probably 50 kms or so later another tyre developed a puncture. At this stage we should have read the message the gods were sending us. Stubborn, we would not accept defeat. We slept it out and the following morning Charles again waved a car down. The tyre was repaired at a garage in the local town and he secured a lift back to our party once again.

Finally, we reached our destination. Tired but successful we sprang into action, setting up camp and exploring the surroundings. It was a good time.

The day was fruitful, filled with vigour, exploration and the capture of some fine specimens. Johan photographed away to his heart's content.

The mamba was caught in the following manner:

Charles headed straight up the cliff, heading for the ledge where Johan and I had bagged the giant mamba a week before, hoping to repeat the event. He was lean, nimble and strong and

was up in a jiffy. Suddenly shouting for our attention, he had a mamba before he had even reached the upper ledge of the cliff. In a minute he had the reptile in a firm grip and was on his way down. We all admired his captive and helped place the mamba in a cotton bag.

Placing a mamba in a bag is not as straightforward as it sounds. One thrusts one's hand and arm into the bag to the bottom; the grip on the mamba's head is then transferred to the hand inside the bag. Once the head is firmly held within the bag, the bag is pulled back over the snake so the snake is now in the bag and the hand on the outside. One then loops the balance of the body into the bag. Before letting go of the head, a secure knot is tied in the bag. The bag is then held above the knot and the head quickly let go of. Now, watch out – snakes bite through bags and a number of handlers and catchers have met a sticky or near sticky end through a bag. I personally had a close call when a bag brushing against my leg left me with two small blood stains on my trousers! A large spitting cobra had taken the opportunity to sink his fangs into me. Thankfully, almost all the venom in this case had been absorbed by the cloth snake bag and my trousers, leaving me with mild local symptoms.

Usually we placed a bag with a dangerous snake such as a mamba into a tin or box to prevent such an accident. On this outing, destiny's hour was drawing to a conclusion, all the while escaping our attention. All our tins and boxes now had captives in them. I decided to place the mamba in the boot under a pair of thick jeans – Johan's jeans. He would only need these on Sunday and I would hand him his jeans, being general custodian of the dangerous captives.

That evening we ate well, cooking on an open fire, using flat rocks on the coals as hot plates. Presently we all fell into a deep sleep around the fire, leaving the day and previous night's difficulties far behind us.

I don't recall much about the Sunday morning. I know we were up early, had a bite and began our movement into the bush. Somewhere around early afternoon the day was over and we broke camp and began to pack and prepare for the home run. We changed from our bush clothes into our last clean clothing. Johan came to me at the appropriate time and asked for his jeans, which he well knew were lying on top of the mamba. I obliged, opened the boot and retrieved his jeans and handed them to him.

We were all changing into our clothing and putting final touches to our packing and tidying. I was at the bonnet of the car still changing when Johan's cry split the still bushveld air.

'The mamba has bitten me!' he screamed in a desperate panicked and high-pitched voice. I dropped everything and almost leapt the entire distance to the rear where Johan was staggering backwards holding his right wrist with his left hand – staring disbelievingly at the fang punctures on his inner hand below his thumb. I too was staring at the exact spot in equal disbelief.

'What the hell were you doing in the boot?' I shouted.

'Getting my jeans,' he replied. The jeans I had given to him a few minutes before – and which he was now wearing! It seems I had interrupted destiny and so she caused a replay to thwart my unwitting intervention of the flow of events. It seems that after putting his jeans on, some force drove him back to the boot in an attempt to retrieve his jeans, which he was, as I have said, already wearing, without my help as was the plan. Alas, the jeans were of course not there. He clutched at the bag where his jeans had been – a completely inexplicable action.

The mamba needed no further prompting and with Johan's hand on the bag, the large snake plunged its fangs deep into his hand, injecting an enormous amount of venom. All those premonitions from the Jehovah's Witnesses to the obstacles placed before us had now turned into a reality. The event was now transferred to the stage of life and we were the audience.



Well, if you think this is a dramatic and fanciful view, dear reader, please give me a better explanation.

The effects of the venom were devastating. This robust, healthy, fit man in his early prime went down within a few minutes. We broke open the two serum kits we had – not sufficient to treat a mamba bite fully, but enough to delay the effects until we reached real help. Actually, we were just young adventurers who had placed ourselves in a position beyond our capabilities. I suppose this is the nature of adventure and is why adventure can be dangerous. The events to follow were staggering.

We placed Johan on the back seat and drove towards the nearest help – my old military base. I knew they had oxygen there and we needed oxygen to prevent asphyxiation when the venom interrupted his breathing after our serum was depleted. An ambulance would also be available. I found his vein and inserted the needle. I was in the vein – I did not remove the needle after that but simply removed each empty syringe and inserted the next into the needle still in his vein. His recovery was remarkable each time 10 cc of serum were injected into him, but finally the last ampoule had been used.

After this he lapsed into semi-consciousness and started vomiting, defecating and urinating involuntarily. We reached the military base, but the medical facility had been somewhat downgraded and there were no qualified staff. All they could produce was an oxygen cylinder and a mask. This was not the help we needed: he needed oxygen in his lungs, not at his nostrils!

The local ambulance arrived. Johan was bundled in and raced off to the nearest town. We followed in the Opel, arriving after the ambulance. I ran into the hospital.

‘Where is Johan?’ I demanded. The nurse pointed me in the direction of the ward and the bed.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘The doctor gave him an ampoule of serum and has left him resting.’

‘Resting!’ I shouted at the top of my voice. ‘Dying, more likely! One never leaves a mamba bite patient alone and certainly not before giving him the required dose of serum.

‘An ampoule?’ I shouted again. ‘He needs another 6 or 8 at least.’ I burst into the room and stopped in my tracks. Johan was lamely pointing at an imaginary vision and mumbling weakly. He was pointing at the mountains near his home town where he was to photograph his black leopard. He was clearly dying. I called for the doctor, life support, serum, any emergency intervention I could think of. I was, however, subdued by the staff. The doctor, as I later found, wanted to move this difficult case to Pretoria, thereby sentencing him to a certain death as there was no hope of him surviving the journey. I was just too young and inexperienced to intervene in a meaningful way.

Johan was once again placed in an ambulance with a young nurse and no life support. I forced my way in.

‘I am going with him,’ I insisted. The doors shut and we left at breakneck speed. I asked the nurse to find his pulse as he looked dead. She could not find a pulse. I started heart massage like a man possessed.

‘He has a slight pulse now,’ she said.

‘Give him mouth to mouth,’ I instructed. Both she and I continued for at least an hour. I remember the ambulance nearly losing control as it crossed the Apies River. The staff at the hospital in Pretoria were waiting. They rushed Johan into the emergency area and I followed on, exhausted.

After a short wait, a rather callous, uninterested nursing sister approached me and simply said, ‘He is dead; probably died in the ambulance,’ and walked off.

I waited outside until the Opel arrived. We drove to Jumbo’s home. Our prize mamba was there and our new captive in the boot. We were no longer so proud of our pursuits. Jumbo’s mother was going to be the first to hear of the event. We parked and walked into the house. It was quite late and strangely enough

the door was open. Jumbo's mother was waiting for us. This was unusual. We filed into the room.

Before we could utter a word from our broken spirits she exclaimed, 'You don't have to tell me; Johan was here earlier.'

We stared at her in utter disbelief.

'Yes,' she said, 'he told me he had died and what had happened, but he was happy. He wanted to go to the outhouse and he spent some time there watching the big mamba,' the one we had caught the week before. 'He was there for twenty or thirty minutes'. He acknowledged her and then left. 'He is OK, quite happy,' she said.

His family visited me some years later. They felt my discomfort (still feeling guilty for his death). It was a brief visit. They were more gracious than they needed to be. I did not tell them about the premonitions and the clairvoyant. At the time I simply could not.

I was back in the apartment after the weekend's events. It was now the third weekend. Alone in the apartment, there was a knock at the door on the Sunday morning. I opened the door. The Jehovah's Witnesses were there, as promised. Smiling, they announced they now had an answer for Johan.

'Too late,' I said. 'He is dead.'

## **The day I died: an African story of adventure or misadventure**

It was the early 1970s; I was in my early 20s. I had established myself as a competent snake handler and entrepreneur and secured a prime site at the Goodwood showgrounds, an annual trade fair attended by many thousands of people in the Cape Peninsula. It was a grand occasion for all, hosting pop stars such as Cliff Richard on occasion; local pop stars, a huge agricultural contingent, an arena with various events, stores selling goods such as traditional foods, leather goods, toys, novelties, also sideshows, fortune tellers, pony rides and the like.

Our snake park, which was erected each year and then dismantled, was right next to the broadcasting tower in the central showgrounds close to the main arena. In the 25 years that we established our temporary snake park on this site, many exciting and near tragic events occurred.

In this particular year an event was to play out which led to my “death” and the most bizarre set of events that I could ever imagine. As usual we were the most popular attraction, with many thousands of people attending our exhibition to view the numerous venomous snakes and other venomous creatures and our demonstrations given throughout the day. All went reasonably well: the word ‘reasonably’ is used advisably as there were always incidents, but most incidents were manageable and not necessarily newsworthy. Towards the end of the 10-day event we were about to celebrate a very successful 9 days, the following being the 10th and last day. Shortly before shutting down the snake park for the evening at 10 p.m., I noticed that a large green mamba, one of our prize specimens, had no water in her water bowl.

Now, green mambas possess dangerously neurotoxic venom. They are beautiful, sleek, well-proportioned snakes, with beautifully proportioned heads, almost a gentle, benign smile on the elongated face, but effective in their ability to strike and inject a deadly dose of venom into its prey or in self-defence. This mamba had been in captivity for many years and had never displayed any signs of aggression; nor did it after the event. Green mambas occur on the east coast of South Africa; in fact from northern Pondoland up to the border of Mozambique and beyond, usually within a short distance from the coastline. Here they hunt birds and rodents and ply their trade in the lush, dense forests which occur in these semi-tropical coastal areas.

Ever mindful of the needs of our charges, I immediately went to fetch fresh water for the interned reptile. The Cape, also known as the Cape of Storms, had lived up to its reputation that day by producing its famed south-easter wind, also known as The Cape Doctor, shifting tons of sand around the Cape Flats and indeed across the showgrounds. The enclosure the mamba was housed in had a locked sliding glass front. It was necessary to unlock the latch, gently slide the glass section into an open position and replenish the water in the drinking bowl. The south-easter had deposited sand into the track, however, causing the glass sliding door to jam. As it was late at night and having given demonstrations with venomous snakes every 40-45 minutes throughout the day, a touch of impatience set in and I attempted to force the glass sliding door open.

After a few attempts, the sand in the track suddenly gave way and the door slid open with a jolt, along with my hand which projected into the cage behind the glass and directly poked at the peacefully resting mamba on his decorative branches. The poor snake clearly thought she was being attacked and responded gallantly by biting me on the left index finger. I received a full complement of venom from a 1.8 metre green mamba.

The snake released my finger immediately and retreated. I shut the cage and locked it and proclaimed to all and sundry, 'Sh\*t, the mamba has bitten me!'

I had been bitten by venomous snakes before and have known others who had been bitten; I was all too familiar with what was to follow. Time was of the essence and my brother and other colleagues sprang into action. I was bundled into the nearest vehicle and we rushed out of the showgrounds, hampered by the crowds, our destination being the Conradie Hospital in Pinelands, a suburb not too far from the showgrounds.

As we left, my brother called to one of our colleagues to retrieve our serum stocks, as many hospitals are notorious for being without snake bite serum in a country where snake bite is common. The trip to the hospital was a semi-blur. As I attempted to come to terms with the predicament I found myself in, the envenomation was progressing moment by moment. Mamba venom primarily cuts off the impulse from the central nervous system to the diaphragm, causing asphyxiation. I had begun hallucinating and according to my brother and colleagues had been reciting Shakespeare for a time. I was fond of Shakespeare, but, I thought to myself in retrospect, not this fond.

On arriving at Conradie Hospital, the urgent nature of the situation was quickly explained to the night desk, who ushered us through to the emergency room whilst calling the attendant doctor on the intercom. A nurse led me to an awaiting emergency bed where I happily collapsed and sat briefly viewing all around me in a bemused state. I began to lose control of my limbs, my breathing and all my muscular ability. At this point the doctor arrived, looking flustered and bewildered. He indicated that he was an intern, that they had expected a quiet night; that an emergency of this nature had never crossed his mind and that he did not have the foggiest idea of what to do. The one statement I remember him making was, 'How is it that I am faced with the bite of a green mamba in Cape Town?' He then did the most

sensible thing, which was to ask us what we thought he should do. In my heart of hearts I had rather hoped that he would be the one to supply the answer to the question.

With great rapidity I, in my dying moments of consciousness, and my brother offered all the information we could on the green mamba, its venom, the effects thereof and what was required to prevent inevitable death. It was at this point that he indicated an all too common scenario: 'We have no anti-venom in the hospital.'

I could no longer support my body and collapsed in a lying position, whereafter the nurses positioned me very nicely on the bed. I know that at around that time one of our colleagues arrived with our batch of serum comprising 8 ampoules.

For a mamba bite 8 ampoules may suffice, but as many as 12 or occasionally more may be required to neutralise the venom.

As my condition deteriorated I began to feel somewhat euphoric, unafraid of death and quite serene. I was moved into a room which I assumed was intended for those who required treatment when they were near death. A host of medical staff gathered around the bed. I was given all 8 ampoules of serum. I had become completely paralysed.

Unbeknown to all those attending to me, the paralysis of the mamba bite leaves one incapable of moving any muscle at all, not even so much as an eyelid. Paralysis is complete, but there is full consciousness; in particular, hearing is at its most exquisite level. According to other sources, as a result of my experience, and the experience of another victim of a mamba bite, well known in the snake fraternity, further research was conducted and indeed at one point graves of mamba bite victims earlier in the century were exhumed. It was found that a number of these snake bite victims were buried, obviously in my intermediate condition. They were fully paralysed, assumed dead, yet were able to audibly witness the awful grief of their family members, their own interment in a coffin, the lowering of the coffin into the grave

and the steady shovel by shovel entombment underground. One can only make a half-hearted attempt at imagining the awful reality which must have faced these victims as they lay helpless, yet fully conscious, witnessing their own burial.

Some of the coffin lids had been gouged by the interred snake bite victims in their attempt to escape the coffin and claw their way out of the grave, leaving wood splinters embedded under their nails.

Whilst I was in this state of paralysis, the doctor could barely find any vital signs and thought I was either dead or dying. He felt that a tracheotomy would be a good procedure to follow. All these deliberations were discussed between him and his staff, all assuming that I was deeply unconscious and unaware. Unbeknown to him, I was more aware than ever before in my entire life and could hear every syllable. I recall the sound of them assembling the tools of their trade and discussing their methodology whilst exclaiming, to myself, You idiot, can't you see I am okay?

At some point I must have been close to death, as I found myself viewing the whole event from a distant part of the theatre. It seemed as if I was perched in the corner of the ceiling watching a comedy unfold. There came a stage where the intern was unsure whether the tracheotomy should be performed or not. He decided to phone his professor. I will never forget this phone call.

The phone was in the theatre. When he reached his professor, who was indeed having dinner with his family in a restaurant, he described the predicament he was in. What I recall mainly is the professor raising his voice at the unfortunate intern and berating him for disturbing him while he was at dinner with his family. My thoughts about this professor at the time were singular. I felt that should I ever encounter him, I would find a physical means of dealing with him to show my thanks for his 'care'.



To his credit, he turned up at the hospital some time after the call, strode up to my apparently lifeless body and conducted several tests. Somehow I know what he looked like, although I was still paralysed. By this time I had returned from the out of body experience and was once again confined within my flesh. I remember him saying that my breathing was discernible and there should be no tracheotomy. I can't be sure, but I think the relief of this statement caused me to let go and I sank into a deep sleep; slowly my consciousness was withdrawn.

It appears after this time I was monitored, kept in High Care and when my vital signs improved 24 hours or so later, I was moved to a ward all on my own. It is here that I woke up curious one morning, and wondered what I was doing there. There was no-one in sight, I felt fit and strong and I swung my legs onto the floor and could hardly remember much of what had taken place. I found my clothing and boots in a small cupboard next to the bed. I dressed and walked out of the hospital unchallenged. I still had a substantial amount of money in one of my pockets and paid for a taxi to the airport, where I was able to purchase a ticket on a local flight back to Johannesburg.

My brother, family, friends and colleagues were still awaiting word from the hospital, but alas I was already in Johannesburg. The inspiration for the title of this book *The Day I Died* is now explained.

Several of the local newspapers had reported this event as they had always followed the antics of our snake exhibition at the showgrounds/trade fair. They had accurately reported that I had somehow survived.

However, a newspaper in the remote regions of the North West had, for reasons known only to them, reported that I had succumbed to the mamba bite and was now definitely dead. During my compulsory military training which had taken place in this region, there were a number of permanent force military personnel at our Base camp who had become my friends. They

had all been exposed to the newspaper article which had reported my absolute and utter death as result of the mamba bite.

Apparently, they had all agreed that it had been inevitable that a snake would kill me one day; that I was a reasonably decent chap. At least some of them were fond of me and some were even upset at my passing. I was now dead and the date of the newspaper report was 'the day I died'.

One doesn't know how many people have been considered dead and then returned to life, apart from at least one great religious leader we all are most familiar with, but I had become one of those.

Some four years later, very much alive and missing this beautiful and remote part of the country where I had seen out my military training, I decided to return for a spell, climb the cliffs I so cherished, walk the well-wooded plains, and above all to drop in and visit my old military base.

I took the road from Johannesburg through Pretoria, across the Apies River and northwards on the Great North Road. After reaching Warm Baths I proceeded west towards Vaalwater, then beyond to the town of Ellisras where the military base had been established years before. I drove into the base, parked the car in the familiar parking lot and strode into the mess looking for my favourite sergeant.

I found him in his office seated behind his desk. I smiled at him and extended my hand. He recoiled and shot out of his chair, knocking the chair clean over, went completely pale and exclaimed at the top of his voice, 'STERZEL, YOU'RE DEAD! Sterzel, you're dead!'

I thought to myself, What on earth are you talking about?

Before another word could be uttered, he ran out of the office down the passage, only this time shouting almost joyfully, 'Sterzel's not dead, he's alive!'

I remained motionless in the office whilst doors opened and shut down the passage, then heard a group of people making

their way back down the passage chatting excitedly to one another. They poured into the office, then stood there staring at me. One by one they came over and touched me and shook my hand and all at once began asking me how it was that I came to be alive when in fact I was dead? The mystery began to unfold as we spoke and I related the story of my narrow escape in Cape Town. Later that morning, as I left the Air Force Base, I thought how strange it must be when a 'dead' friend walks into your office.

That was the last time I returned to the Air Force Base, although strangely enough I now own a farm not far from Ellisras.



## **King cobra and cowardice**

I am not given to acts of cowardice; however, I succumbed once, and only once in a very small way, to this lowly outcast emotion. This harrowing event took place in the city of Windhoek, Namibia – South West Africa as it was then known.

We had planned a large exhibition at the Windhoek Trade Fair and this year we had a new and special attraction – an Indian king cobra between 4 and 5 metres long – a true king of snakes. This is the largest venomous snake in the world, reaching 6 metres and capable of killing an elephant with a single bite!

I had painstakingly raised this king cobra from a young 1 metre long specimen over a number of years. His temperament was disgusting. A more bad-tempered, bad-mannered, calculating, downright dangerous snake I had never had the misfortune to ‘own’.

King cobras eat only other snakes as a rule; the locals used to bring us all the snake ‘road kill’ in the vicinity for us to freeze as ‘king cobra fast food’.

Nobody who worked at the snake park was untouched in one way or another by this mindless snake. It is the only snake to have ever chased me with intent to commit grievous bodily harm, and I recall a time when I was forced to dive through a narrow window to escape a concerted attack launched at me by the cobra (I had left the window open in its cage in case of just such an event whilst cleaning out its water bowl). I landed on cement brick paving and scraped and thudded to a skin-rending halt. When I looked back, the snake was reared up more than a metre peering through the open window, wondering where I had disappeared to so quickly – like I had just spoiled his fun.

The snake one day actually succeeded in his primary objective, which was to bite me at any cost.

His enclosure needed a spring clean. We rarely removed him physically for enclosure cleaning as it was always such a drama. Instead we found that throwing a large sack over him seemed to work. He would curl up under the sack and enjoy a nap in seclusion while we quickly and nervously went about our work.

On this particular day I performed the “sack” trick and once he had calmed, and the sack “stopped moving”, I climbed in and proceeded to clean. Our cleaning staff were not allowed near him as we knew we would be regularly hiring new staff if we did – if you know what I mean.

I had been brushing some dirt into a pan when a movement caught my eye. I was on all fours – this I thought would be an excellent time to faint! The king cobra, who was usually quite noisy about things, had silently emerged from his sack blanket and was standing, hood spread, towering well over 1.5 metres over me with, as usual, his mouth partly open to ensure he looked as evil and menacing as he possibly could.

I was speechless. I knew at any moment his monotonously usual attack would begin.

I was quick for my size. I twisted and shot bolt upright facing this deceptively cunning King. He lunged forward and I performed a move which would make a prima ballerina proud – he missed me mainly because I was no longer where I had been a second ago. I couldn’t keep this up for long as the law of averages would dictate that he would meet with success sooner or later. I couldn’t reach the door as he was in front of it. Two more lunges and I realised that I needed a plan – FAST.

I had to offer him something to bite – preferably not me ...

I lifted my boot in self-defence and he gladly took the “bait”. He bit the boot with the determination of one who has finally succeeded in a long and suffering quest. I watched as apparently endless venom flowed over my boot and dripped onto the floor leaving a small pool of venom on the concrete base of his cage.

As I moved to the door he was dragged behind me, still clinging to my boot. I “kicked” him off as I exited the door. We soon built him a new enclosure which was safer to work in, but alas, with this snake the drama never ended.

Back to Namibia and the Trade Fair ...

As with other trade fairs in the country, we were consistently the main attraction. I remember the day that Joshua Nkomo, the political leader from Zimbabwe, with his longtime friend Kenneth Kaunda, a well-known African President, came to attend one of my demonstrations.

The mass of attendant bodyguards looked more menacing than the snakes. The guests of honour were a happy pair and enjoyed the show before thanking me politely.

This was an excellent start. We had large crowds and the atmosphere was good. The Namibians are an agreeable bunch. I had good friends here and they knew how to party. It is hard to find a greater ‘party animal’ than a Namibian on a good night.

Well, it was Friday night – the snake park shut its doors at 10 p.m. All snakes were checked, secured and watered. The king cobra was in a deep narrow pit dug for effect and was coiled snugly on a bed of grass, looking to all intents and purposes utterly bored with the constant peering into his temporary enclosure. A black mesh covered the pit to secure him. We were tired but anxious to spend at least some time consuming Windhoek Lager to the sound of German music with friends and strangers alike. Such fun we had!

Saturday morning greeted our lightly throbbing heads with the reality of the busiest day at the showgrounds. Many thousands of people from all reaches of Namibia would turn up today. It was time to prepare to meet the crowds.

We arrived, opened up, cleaned and tidied. Checked the demonstration area, checked the cages and replenished water. I was near the cash desk. I will never forget the moment I heard

the following words: a voice from inside the park exclaimed: 'I can't seem to see the king cobra.'

I froze in my tracks. 'Perhaps he's under the grass,' I replied.

There was a long pause. 'No, he isn't!' came the reply.

'Are you absolutely sure?' I said.

'Yes' came the reply.

ARMEGEDDON. I WAS DONE FOR.

A hundred scenarios shot through my near-panicked mind. The gates to the showgrounds would open soon. 10 000 people would pour into the showgrounds, covering every corner of the turf – and my maniac king cobra was loose, hiding somewhere on the showgrounds. He would most likely see each new visitor as me, his arch enemy, and plan his next attack!

I stared blankly at his empty enclosure – saw he had pushed a poorly secured section of mesh off its fixing point.

I disbelievingly followed his track across the loose sand to the region beyond our exhibit stand on to hard ground.

No more tracks on this ground to follow.

Where was he?

Only God knew.

How does one search for a 14 foot long king cobra whilst at the same time appearing not to do so? Answer: not easily. We searched in the most nonchalant manner we could. Each time we drew the attention of a curious onlooker wondering why an 'ordinary' visitor to the show would be peering up a drainpipe, under a car, into a bush, and up a tree, etc., we would right ourselves and move on as if we had lost interest in some item of fleeting significance.

I had had enough ... years of incidents had come to bear on me and for a moment I felt weakened. I had made up my mind. I called everyone together and made an announcement.

‘Listen, guys,’ I said, with scant eloquence. ‘This is serious’ – as if they didn’t know.

‘Now – I am going into the bush; you will run the show. But not only this, you WILL find the snake, capture it, return it to its enclosure, secure it and then continue. No-one is to be harmed. I will come out of the bush later in the day and return to find all is well and you have succeeded.’ I turned and left. I drove 30 km out of Windhoek and went on a long, long walk under the clear Namibian sky.

Four or so hours later I figured either someone has now been killed, or is dying or the snake is back ‘home’ safely – one or the other. It was time to go back. I stopped some 40 m from the snake park and observed for a while. Things seemed normal – no ambulance, no helicopter, no shut snake park, people in and out.

‘Can it be,’ I thought ‘all is OK?’ I walked up to my chief demonstrator. ‘Did you catch it?’

‘Yes!’

The story unfolded. Shortly after lunch time, a stall holder was fetching something from his car when he thought he saw a snake under it. He popped over to the snake park a couple of hundred metres away and related his brief encounter with what he thought might have been a snake. Bryan, an utterly fearless man, our chief demonstrator, quickly responded and retrieved our escapee from under the man’s car. Almost no-one saw the recapture. The snake had clearly been under the bonnet for the night and most of the day, but the heat of the sun had probably driven it down to the ground just at the time the car’s owner walked past. The recapture was fairly routine and he was back in his pit. A disaster had been averted.

I had never been so happy in my life to see a snake.

Good on you, Bryan!

I can’t recall shedding a tear when the cobra died a few years later.



## **In a deadly squeeze**

It was 1975. I had joined a game capturing team as a sort of apprentice, and also because the owner thought he might find a market for snakes which I would be able to capture for them. In this world of game capturing you learn fast, otherwise you come unstuck. 'The Quick and the Dead' would be an apt line in the recruitment blurb for game capturing wannabes – especially in those days.

We toured the country capturing all manner of animals for game farms, zoos and institutions, etc. There was often laughter to the core; confrontation, good and bad times, conflict, hardship, death and recovery.

I soon learnt which role I was not fond of in the scheme of things.

For a time it was given to me to use a scrambler motorbike to 'bring up the rear', traversing the veld behind a herd of antelope, etc. ensuring they didn't break and run backwards away from the nets. It was like a battleground.

A helicopter would locate the animals and begin to herd them in the general direction of the nets. Two 4x4s would join the hunt on the left and right and pick up the chase as the animals headed towards the nets, preventing a left or right break. This was a good strategy and it worked almost every time. Occasionally, a herd, however, had a change of heart, turned in their tracks and broke to the rear! This is where my role came to the fore. Success or failure was now in my hands and in this, my hour, I took it seriously.

The scrambler was revved repeatedly – baffles removed to augment the sound – and I traversed the veld persuading the antelope that their quest for freedom was a bad idea. There was a slight hitch, however, in this seemingly simple task I played – ant hills, ant bear holes, rocks, tree stumps, small dongas, to name a

few. The first of my “never get back on that bloody bike” events occurred on a crisp winter’s morning on the Highveld.

The herd of antelope broke to the rear. I accelerated and began traversing the plain back and forth. The antelope responded well and turned back towards the nets. For good effect I turned and made a last run to ensure they would not change their minds again. One moment the antelope were clearly in my vision, and I was moving it. Next thing, I couldn’t understand why one minute I was looking at the antelope and now I was staring at the sky! It was all so strange, I thought. I had hit a gently sloping anthill and was now heading into the stratosphere. I can’t remember returning to earth, as I was knocked out for a time. No one looks for you because the emphasis is on the animals and their capture. You ‘live or die’ alone. I lived, very much alone, and limped back to camp.

I recall a most noteworthy occasion during this brief period of my life. We were to capture a variety of animals in the Vivo district in the north west, not far from the Limpopo River. The farmer, a prominent doctor, recounted to us one evening his experiences in Sharpeville – a dark blot on South African history and its violent and segregated past. He recalled the day when he single-handedly felled a number of men with his rifle whilst his Zulu companion felled several with a pick axe. We were riveted, but I felt something like a sense of disgust at his story. Many of us who were living during the time of this macabre, historical ‘side-show’ were unaware of the true horror that had unfolded in Sharpeville. We, in any case, had deeply biased opinions born of indoctrination by the government of the day, which was far-reaching. I slept soberly that night.

The following day was active, as usual, and I gladly left the thoughts and memories of the previous evening behind me. The night to come was, however, of a completely different nature. Soon after a real bushveld supper of venison, potatoes, veg, pudding and endless stories, we all retired to the lounge. I might

just mention at this stage that I had long curly hair down to my shoulders, I was 6ft tall and weighed around 180 lbs, fit and at my peak. The farmer offered us a ‘compulsory’ drink of mampoer brewed, I think, from maroela fruit. A good mampoer brew is rather like a nuclear weapon in its effect, so high in alcohol content as to go off ‘the Richter Scale’.

Presently, we had become supermen and made a bizarre decision. We had lost most of the herd of impala we had tried to capture that day and thought in our deeply inebriated state that we could redeem ourselves by a night capture.

Night capture? There was no such thing, actually. However, having invented the term in our drunken state, it had to be instituted. All those under 80 years of age piled into a robust truck. Our ‘well thought out’ plan was to track down a herd of impala and the youngest of us i.e. myself, would start off diving on to ‘die bliksemse rooibokke!’ (the ?\*! impala), thus capturing, I suppose, at least one.

Unfortunately for us, we actually found a small herd of impala right in the middle of a sand track and the chase was on, spotlights lighting up the antelope ahead. Well, I was about to execute my first Batman act – leaping on to and subduing my victim. I have no idea what speed we were travelling at and it didn’t matter. When a large bushy tree was close, the impala slowed by a bottleneck as they skirted around this tree and I took my cue, diving into the night. Diving off a moving truck, I might add, catapults one far beyond the intended target. I flew through the air in a never-ending flight of fancy and ended in the lower branches of the tree. Did I say tree? This was no ordinary tree; it was a blinkblaar-wag-’n-bietjiebos – a ‘wait a moment bush’. Thousands of small stout curved thorns clung to my flesh, clothing and hair. I was suspended above the ground in my cradle of thorns. Incidentally, this wag-’n-bietjie is *Ziziphus mucronata*, related to the tree *Ziziphus christus* from which the thorny

branches were taken to be placed on the head of Jesus before his crucifixion.

Amidst peals of laughter the crew tried in vain to extricate me. I was yelling repeatedly from my thorny prison.

The conservative farmer, who had from time to time threatened to cut my 'takhare' with hedging shears, now came to the fore. He returned quickly to the homestead to fetch his shears to help cut me free, threatening that he would use the opportunity to give me my long overdue haircut at the same time. He returned and snipped away at the branches and then took his gap and cut a chunk of my hair off, proudly displaying the locks to all. None of us faced the following day with much enthusiasm as the effects of the mampoer gradually began to wear off.

On Sunday we had the day off. 'Off' for me meant an opportunity to wander through this wonderland of remote bushveld – sandy with rocky outcrops and magnificent trees.

I chanced upon a black mamba of average length. I stopped so as not to panic it. It watched me curiously. I remained motionless as the snake, unperturbed, continued forward – it was hunting. This was the first time I had restrained myself from capturing a snake at close quarters; thankfully so, as I was treated to an education. I followed the snake for what seemed like a kilometre as it moved from rocky outcrop to rocky outcrop, probing into elephant shrew nests, seeking its prey. I watched as he met with success at one nest. His head slowly entered the nest and there was a quick jerk forwards. A few moments later he retracted his head with a young, limp shrew in his mouth and swallowed it right in front of me. I had witnessed a very seldom, if ever, seen event. I was so taken by this that I left the mamba in peace.

Farmers in the district knew of my snake capturing prowess and before long a request was put to the team leader. A large mamba had killed a local farmer's bull at the cattle watering hole. He

feared another 'attack' and asked if we could locate and remove the mamba. Naturally we obliged. This was no ordinary farmer. I was fascinated to discover that he had been a participant in the Battle of Britain, flying for the Royal Air Force, helping to defeat the enemy on that historic day over England. I was struck by this information and could not wait to meet him.

I met him at his petrol station, which served the rural community. He was elderly but fit. We shook hands and chatted. Towards the end of the conversation he made a startling statement. He said, in Afrikaans, that he was very happy that I would attempt to catch the mamba, but if I were successful and held the mamba in my own hands, 'dat hy nooit weer aan my hand sal raak nie' (he would not touch my hand again). He referred to the snake as the very devil.

A strange sentiment, I thought, for a hero unafraid of an airborne gun battle! I found out, however, at least partly, why he was so utterly spooked by mambas. One must remember that even 40 years ago, if you were bitten by a mamba, death was an absolute certainty – there was no second chance. What a prospect! In his younger days, in this wild part of the country, he had lived in a home below a large hill. There was a path leading up the hill and at a point where there were some steps, railings had been constructed on either side. Bougainvillea creepers had been planted on the two railings and over a few years had grown into dense hedges. The path had not been used for quite some time and three, four or five – according to him – large black mambas had taken up residence in a large old termite hill next to the path and obviously enjoyed lying in the cool hedge.

On this day he was walking briskly up the path, reached the steps and then moved up between the creepers. Somewhere at mid-point there were multiple movements in the creeper on both sides of him and he froze, filled with terror! Seemingly all about him were bodies of large snakes moving menacingly around in the creepers and then he spotted heads – heads of mambas

staring at him, not an arm's length away. He leapt right down the stairs and ran back to the house, where he retrieved a shotgun and then massacred the mambas remaining in the hedge. It had apparently had such a profound effect on him that he never quite came to terms with it.

We were some 30 m from the water hole when I spotted the mamba lying loosely on the ground under an overhanging acacia branch in the dappled light. One of the farmer's staff had volunteered to carry my equipment. It wasn't much equipment, actually: a snake grab stick, a cotton bag and a large tin to place the bagged snake into. He was just being helpful. I pointed the snake out to him and he promptly did the most sensible thing – for him that is – which was to run away – with all my equipment! We only found him later that day.

The mamba began to move off and I sprinted and caught the last part of his body as he was disappearing down a mongoose hole near the watering hole. I could now see why the cattle were getting bitten. If the snake was sunning himself near the watering hole and the cattle converged on him unwittingly to drink, he would be more or less surrounded and trapped and would then obviously strike out in self-defence. I had to use a stick handed to me by one of the team to pin the mamba's head, and before long he was safely in my grip. I was dusty and sweating and now had nowhere to put the mamba since my assistant had vanished.

I carried the mamba back to the vehicle, the tailgate was opened for me and I sat on the back of the truck holding the snake coiled on my lap in a firm grip. We drove slowly back to the petrol station and the World War II pilot, as he had become known in my mind, cautiously approached the vehicle. He stared at me and the looped mamba on my lap, shook his head, said, 'Baie dankie' (thank you) and walked off without another word.

We wrapped up the following week with a crowd of local farmers and others wishing us farewell. As we all shook hands,

our World War pilot withdrew his hand from mine and said, 'Tot siens, maar ek skud glad nie jou hand nie!' (Good bye, but I will never shake your hand).

Our next capturing outing was near Pretoria. One of the onlookers and prospective purchasers of the blesbok we were capturing was the owner of a crocodile farm. As he later related to me when I worked for him, he had been one of Hitler's youth during the Second World War. I was having a right historical time. During dinner he recounted the desperate and horrifying stories of that time. He had been one of the youth who was tasked to dig into the sand tracks where the British tanks would soon advance on the failing German defences. He was then no more than a child. They were tasked with disguising the burrows and waiting for the tanks to approach. As a tank moved over the burrow they were hiding in, they would push the cover aside and place a grenade in the track which, detonating, would incapacitate the tank. He continued to describe how the British soon recognised the holes and would drive with one track above the hole, stop the track and then activate the other, causing the tank to spin slowly around in a circle, cutting into the earth and grinding the trapped child or children into oblivion.

Jan Khulman hired me for a time and I set about helping him with his crocodile operation. He was a proud, intelligent and precise man. He was one of few, if not the only, 'white' man who had witnessed the sacrificing of a maiden to a crocodile in an age-old ritual in a wild part of our country, in the north. These maidens were chosen at a very young age and schooled for this purpose. When the day of the sacrifice arrived, the prettiest maiden was chosen. I don't know what became of the rest. Shortly before she was hurled to the crocodiles and her death, she was hog-tied to a pole and carried through the bush. Jan Khulman was blindfolded so as not to be able to identify the locality later. Despite the fact that the young maiden had been

schooled for this event, the reality of what was to happen nonetheless caused abject terror in the final moments.

Phew!

Now, back to the title of the story – ‘In a Deadly Squeeze’.

During our many excursions in Namibia, farmers had often asked us to remove large pythons from their farms, especially if they had taken calves, which was a substantial monetary loss to them. We obliged.

One year my older brother captured a real monster, the largest rock python I had ever seen, and brought it back to South Africa. She was pregnant and later laid around 60 eggs. Jan Khulman offered to incubate them in his crocodile egg incubators, and 90 to 100 days later we were treated to 60-odd fine hatchlings emerging from their leathery shells. The mother python was over 15 foot long. After her pregnancy she fed well and soon regained her rather substantial weight. We never weighed her, but I can tell you, she could only be carried on one's shoulders, as she was too heavy to be carried in any other way. Tourist parties visited the croc farm and we invented a real tourist treat, as follows.

After the croc tour a braai was offered under a large tree. We had placed a smaller python, some 3.5 m, in the tree where it coiled up on the branches. There it would remain happily. At an appointed time after the meal I would peer into the tree and feign surprise. All would then look up into the tree and spot the snake to gasps and other exclamations. There would be much excitement, cameras were produced and we watched as they all clicked away, chattering excitedly amongst themselves. It was a good end to their visit.

One weekend, special American guests arrived. I think one was a diplomat. Jan suggested I retrieve our monster python for a special viewing. The python was housed in a shed with a mesh front, filled with a ton of straw which she liked burrowing under.



Here she happily whiled away her days. I was fond of this giant and she was a good-natured snake. Off I went to fetch her. I walked the 100 m odd to the shed and peeled back the straw.

I gently lifted her and placed her over my shoulders to support the weight. All I now had to do was walk back. I did not return.

Jan Khulman thought it unusual that I should take so long and came to find me to hurry me up. I was not being errant in my duty but was fighting for my life: while I was walking back the snake had curiously started arranging its coils around my chest, waist and hips and up to my neck. It did this quite slowly and I thought she was just holding on to me to be more comfortable as my gait was obviously unsettling for her. How the snake did it I will never know, but I caution any person dealing with a large python to take note. Suddenly, the coils slammed shut around me in the blink of an eye. She had wittingly, or unwittingly, trapped my arms to my sides, rendering me defenceless. The top coil forced my chin onto my chest, probably saving my life, as that coil was now not able to exert pressure around my neck. She never tried to bite, through all of this. I staggered a few paces trying to reach help. I remember breathing a last breath as she tightened up so that no further breathing was possible. Another step or two and I went over like a pole. My eyes felt like they were going to pop out of my head.

I did not expect to be rescued, but an angel of mercy suddenly appeared around the corner in the form of Jan Khulman. He was a practical man and not the panicky type. He simply grabbed the snake's massive head and began to unwind its coils. It isn't difficult to unwind a python; its muscles are for constricting but have little power when it comes to keeping them wound. I drew a deep breath. I had a lot to consider.

## **A most unusual shark attack**

Most people attacked by sharks are attacked legitimately, in the ocean – a respectable place to be attacked by a shark. I managed, at all odds, to be attacked by a shark in a swimming pool and escaped without injury, but only just!

In line with my nature I had become a sometime shark fisherman (as well as a conventional fisherman). It's a useless pursuit, where one imagines a sense of power and achievement by hooking a huge marine predator, then using all one's might to 'land' the animal, then let it go. What was that all about?

Wisdom sometimes comes to the young, but in my case some time was needed. My usual shark hunting ground was Natal – from the old West Street Pier outside the then aquarium in Durban to St. Lucia where sharks abound, particularly the Zambezi or bull shark and robust ragged tooth sharks. What we enjoyed most was the St. Lucia environment on the northern Zululand coast where several methods were used to angle for sharks.

The method we preferred was to take the head of a dead grunter, a common and sought-after angling fish, and hook this head to a 12.0 hook attached to 70 lb breaking strain 7-strand cable. The cable, a biting trace, was attached to 800 m - 1000 m of 50 kg breaking strain line on a large centre pin reel fixed to a stout rod. On an ideal day we would swing the grunter's head and lob it into a deep channel near the beach and brace ourselves for the hook up. A leather pad worn as a rudimentary glove was used to 'brake' the reel, as once having hooked a shark, trying to brake or control the reel with the palm of one's hand could cause extensive burns and injuries.

I recall once leaving my leather braking pad behind and of necessity having to use a friend's hat to control the reel. Plumes

of smoke rose from the smouldering hat as the friction of the revolving reel against the hat produced enough heat to cause fire.

To see the large triangular fins of one or more Zambezi sharks cut the shimmering water as they crossed the sand bar, homing in on our bait in the channel, was enough to produce adrenaline for a decade.

One day, whilst roaming the beach to locate a suitable channel, we encountered a tourist in difficulty and seemingly close to drowning. He was 80 m - 100 m from the shore and flailing about weakly, screaming for help. His friends/family were mortified and stood in helpless terror on the beach facing this nightmare.

The currents here could be strong; the backwash treacherous. We knew the sea well. My friend had earned his lifesaving certificate and I was a good fisherman. We combined our respective talents. I hooked my 12.0 hook into his costume and he swam out to the tourist without any regard for himself. The idea was that if he encountered difficulties at any time during the rescue he could grasp the trace wire and I could 'fish' them in. As it turned out he was such a good swimmer he required no assistance from me and the tourist was helped to shallower water. The family swarmed over their rescued companion/family member/whoever. We continued up the beach. No-one really noticed. We were not looking for thanks or reward of any kind. We wanted to fish and he was safe.

The annual Trade Fair in Goodwood in the Cape was looming and the organisers were happy, as usual, for us to erect our snake park; once again it became a major attraction. This year, however, we had a twist. Live sharks were to be displayed as well, we announced, near to the snake park.

This was a hitherto unparalleled spectacle. I must have been 23.

We conducted some research into the establishment of an environment with minimum requirements for housing live sharks

temporarily and were given much advice by aquariums and ichthyologists.

Bull sharks and ragged tooth sharks were most successfully housed in these conditions, but bull sharks were not present in False Bay and there was no guarantee that we would capture a ragged tooth shark. The other species we thought might survive for at least a short period was the bronze whaler, common in False Bay.

A pool was sponsored, a 24 m diameter plastic pool raised 1.4 m above ground – intended to be a swimming pool, not a shark tank! An elaborate filter system was installed and the water was rendered saline using coarse sea salt to the specified requirement.

The game was on!

‘Now, what about the sharks?’ everyone said. Well, I was going to catch them, of course. All these doubting Thomases who thought I had not considered this most essential last detail – really!

Two weeks before the commencement of the show we embarked on our first short capturing expedition. We had a 1.5 ton truck, a tank, oxygen, a sling to lift the shark, help, and me – the purveyor of ocean sharks – on demand.

At Gordon’s Bay in False Bay, Cape Town, the pilots who flew over the bay had often spoken of sharks being clearly visible from the air near the pier at the yacht basin. This we figured was to be our capture ground. A bait shop on the bay, amongst other things, hired out a small row boat at R1.00 per hour. One whole South African Rand, can you imagine that? My colleague would stand at the end of the concrete pier (this was Peter who saved my bacon on the night of the Grizzly Bear) – a breakwater serving the yacht basin, and I would hire the row boat and row to the end of the pier. There I would tie a whole mackerel to my large hook, then row out to sea  $\pm$  400 m to 500 metres whilst

Peter fed line out from the reel. In the row boat I was a little cork on the ocean.

At the 'right' spot, the bait was dropped and I would return the boat. We then sat on the pier and waited, and waited and waited ... Success was not assured.

On our next outing my dear father accompanied me. I don't know why it was, but he always seemed to turn up at the worst possible time. On this day he held the rod whilst I rowed the mackerel out. I had said to him that in the event that a shark picked up the bait, he should do his best to control the reel and I would be back as quickly as I could.

I was returning down the long pier when a motorised boat skippered by a "cowboy" sped out of the yacht basin and past the pier without consideration for fishermen or anything but himself. His boat picked up the line and my father thought he had picked up a shark!!

He attempted to brake the reel with his hand and ended up with deep burns and scars. Undeterred and wishing to aid me in my quest, he then held the reel against his trousers – nylon trousers – which melted as a result of the friction and melted into his flesh in deep wounds. Mercifully, the line snapped and he was relieved of his duty and further injury. I wasn't sure whether I should laugh or cry ... I think I cried with laughter before I reached him and thanked him for his gallant efforts.

We packed up for the day. I was growing concerned as the show was approaching and we had no 'booty' – no shark. I might add that all through this I had a full-time job and a young family.

Our luck was to change. On our next outing – no father this time – I hooked into a large shark – a bronze whaler. Nearly an hour passed while I fought the shark in, to the point where I was absolutely exhausted, experiencing nausea from the final efforts. It was a monster close to 3 metres long.

People in the vicinity had heard of the fight before the shark was coaxed into the protected side of the breakwater. A throng of

onlookers filled the entire pier. Soon the shark was at the slipway. We manoeuvred the sling under its tired body and began lifting it up to the transportation tank. A member of the public who had volunteered to help, grabbed hold of the sling where the shark's ample tail was hanging out. The shark suddenly thrashed about in the sling and gave the unwitting helper a clout of note on the side of his head, sending him flying off the end of the truck and into the bay.

I never got to thank the poor man.

Once the shark was in the transportation tank, the engine roared and we were off. WE HAD DONE IT.

At the showgrounds we transferred the shark into the waiting 'aquarium' and off he went, circling the pool again and again. Boy, were we chuffed.

The show was two days away and already the newspapers had reported the presence of the shark on the showgrounds. The day before the grand opening of the show, the shark faltered. It stopped swimming and lay on the bottom of the pool – swimming only sporadically, then resting again.

I was summonsed.

I was desperate to keep the shark alive. Of course we had no experience whatsoever and were really just acting out our fantasies at the expense of the poor creature. I decided to 'swim' the shark. This meant stripping down, entering the pool, then taking hold of the dorsal and one lateral fin, then walking around the pool forcing oxygen into the shark's mouth and over its gills. In this way the shark would not suffocate.

I leapt into the pool and then it happened.

The shark erupted from the bottom of the pool and came directly at me, mouth open, jaw extended, eyes rolled back and twisted half on its side. I knew I was going to get bitten. I was next to the incoming and outgoing pipes serving the filtration system. How I was quicker than the shark I cannot tell. I grabbed

the nearest pipe and vaulted out of the pool, the shark almost upon me.

As my feet left the water, the shark clamped its jaws around the heavy duty pipes, severing all four of them and ripping a small tear in the pool. Had the shark reached my body, infinitely more tender than the rigid pipe, which he had severed, I would have sustained unthinkable injuries. Those observing the 'attack' said the shark missed me by a fraction and grabbed the pipes in my stead, shaking its head from side to side and cleanly removing the lot.

The shark died the next day.

## **Criminals, cranky crocodiles and an uncanny coincidence**

If one owns a snake and reptile park, you can expect things to happen over a number of years. Some you choose to remember; others you choose to forget. We were a veritable incident ‘factory’.

Our lovely young cashier, Joyce, would walk a considerable distance across a coastal part of the Cape Flats through some remote bushy areas to Strandfontein to work each day. She was a cheerful lass, always on time, bright and kept fit by amongst other things surfing!

One morning she arrived visibly shaken and upset – she had been attacked and raped. She had also been wearing her mother’s engagement ring for the day and this had been taken from her. She broke down, understandably. We were incensed! We saw to her immediate needs and in a short while we and a number of policemen were combing the brush.

Being the rape capital of the world, South Africa that is, this was not an unusual event for the police. We couldn’t find the culprit that day and it became a ‘cold case’.

I guess it was two years later. I was going about my business near the cashier’s cubicle when a shaken, pale-looking Joyce tugged at my overall. ‘He just bought a ticket – he is inside with three friends.’ I established it was in fact the rapist, with his girlfriend and another couple. He did not even recognise his victim.

We called the police immediately and waited. I was not going to let him escape this time. I armed myself with a ‘Taurus .38 Special with a six inch barrel, which I tucked into my deep overall pocket. This gun had served me well on another occasion. I took up a position near the exit as if just observing the many patrons entering and leaving.



Criminals on the Cape Flats are a tough, cruel, hardened lot, prone to violence. I was well aware of this. An elite task force of policemen, whose speciality it was to apprehend gangsters on the Cape Flats, regularly checked on us and we had become quite good friends. They had rescued us just recently from a violent robbery shortly before it got underway. Their timing was superb. Shortly before closing, at dusk, the heavily armed gang had positioned themselves outside the Snake Park (the area outside was now deserted) and sent in one of their members to recce us. I remember it seemed strange that this man wanted to enter the Snake Park so late and was asking questions about the number of people who had visited the Park during the day, how many of us ran the Park, etc. His aim, obviously, was to find out how much cash would be on the property if he multiplied the entrance fee by the number of people who had entered that day. He wanted to know how many of us there were so they knew what they were in for when they effected their robbery.

Before we had finished our conversation, a vehicle screeched to a halt outside the entrance gates. Then there was a hellish fracas. The man who was recce-ing us ran out the front gates and was tackled by one of the plain-clothed task force. Several of them had been arrested, guns and all, without a shot being fired. I saw why no shots had been fired ... the head of the task force had a semi-automatic 9 mm military weapon trained on them and they knew the game was up. I cannot tell you how grateful we were having this task team looking after us. If they hadn't turned up quite out of the blue that evening, God knows what would have happened. What an uncanny coincidence! I had had my hand on my gun under the counter on a shelf, which was usually the case at closing time and when suspicious events took place – and shots would have been fired that day.

They told us that they had known of the gang's activity in the area and that the gang were in our vicinity that day. The task

force had been patrolling local businesses hoping to capture them.

Time was passing quickly and the police hadn't shown up for our rapist. He must exit soon, I thought. Joyce agreed to nod at him as he passed me. She was very brave, concealing her emotions.

She nodded – a man, stocky, just shorter than me, hard looking with strong arms walked past me. I followed him for three or four paces then jerked him back, my left arm around his neck, choking him. At the same time I thrust the 6 inch barrel of my .38 into his lower back.

'If you try anything, I will kill you,' I said. This was not an idle threat. He knew the barrel in his back was not my finger and he followed my every instruction.

His companions bolted – obviously people of a similar ilk! I took him to a structure we were still building behind the cashier's cubicle. There was no roof but the walls were up to 2.8 m. Once in the building I told him I would slowly release my grip and he should walk to the corner he was facing, sit on his backside, legs in front of him with arms behind his back. These instructions were issued in Afrikaans. I kept the gun trained on him at all times.

Alas, it was time for me to give a demonstration to a large waiting crowd, so I called my partner to hold the firearm and guard the rapist until I had completed the demonstration or until the police arrived.

I returned after the demonstration – the rapist was gone! My partner handed the gun back. He admitted that he had felt awkward aiming a gun at an apparently defenceless man and lowered it, assuming our prisoner would remain seated and obedient. As he did this, the animal in the rapist catapulted himself upwards and, gripping the top of the 2.8 m wall, vaulted over like an antelope and disappeared – never to be recaptured.

What can I say? The police were too late.

The slow but sure and precise wheels of universal justice will no doubt reward him with the fruits of his actions at the allotted time.

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Should you visit an institution housing crocodiles, you will probably find these beasts lying about like so many logs, unmoving in an endless motionless state – almost boring after a short time.

Don't be fooled by crocodiles. The lack of activity conceals a cunning predator with a singular purpose – survival. He is deadly in defence, incomparable as a predator and lightning fast in his strike.

One fine day at the Reptile Park a group of reasonably brainless 20-somethings were noisily moving about the place. We were apprehensive of this type of visitor. Over the years we had had such visitors pick up tortoises from their pen and throw them to the crocodiles, or crack their shells on the brick paving, or up-end them in the severe heat of January, February and March, then watch them succumb to heat stroke, much to their amusement. Their cruel antics were endless.

This lot were to receive a taste of their own medicine. Four 2 metre-plus crocodiles were housed in an enclosure with a 1.2 m high wall. A moat lay between the wall and an island which filled most of the enclosure. At one point the moat was narrow and a croc was lying there, its head towards the perimeter wall. One of the 'brain deads', keenly observed by our curator at this time, stated: 'Hierdie krokodille is seker mak' (these crocodiles are probably tame). Before anyone could anticipate his next move, he leaned over the wall – he was thin and tall – and aimed a flat-handed blow to the side of the croc's head to prove his point. A lightning strike by the croc and a quick shake of its head produced a mangled mess that had previously been a hand.

The shocked man turned towards the curator who was now near to him, complained that the crocodile had bitten him and that he needed help. The curator – Bryan, the man featured in the king cobra story – said to him, seemingly emotionless and with years of pent-up feelings for such displays of utter stupidity, vandalism and cruelty, ‘You are bleeding on my brick paving and making a mess.’ With these words he caught his jaw with a strong right hook, flooring him. He ejected the bunch from the Park, shredded hand and all.

Nature Conservation had trapped two man-eating crocodiles in the Levubu River in our northern region. It is somewhere in this area that Jan Khulman had witnessed the sacrificing of the maiden to the crocodile. He had captured a monster crocodile which had taken cattle for three generations in this river. I knew this crocodile. I had never seen a larger one before or since.

The pair had killed and eaten 13 people over a surprisingly short period. Their target was ladies from villages along the river retrieving water, doing their washing and so forth. These crocs were quite large – 250 kg to 350 kg, we estimated, and around 3 m to 3.5 m long. We never weighed or measured our animals, as this was an enormous task, and so always only estimated. The male was larger than the female by virtue of one fact. She had a truncated tail – at least half the tail had been removed during some violent event, probably when she was quite young. We gladly accepted the crocs to boost our stocks.

The Nature Conservation Officers were not sure if one or both the crocs were the culprits, but the attacks in the river stopped. They called shortly after delivering the crocodiles and asked if we could find a way of determining which of the crocs was the instigator, the principal man-eater.

Being attacked by a crocodile must be one of the most shattering experiences one could ever not hope for; you would be dragged from the banks or shallow water and drowned before your limbs were torn off and the feast began.

I said, 'Sure, I have an idea how to find out whether one or both were the culprits'. We had constructed a 'winter' house for the crocs to help them through the Cape winters, which were miserable for crocodiles – and for us too, at times. The winter house was long and had an elongated shallow pool running down the centre about 800 mm to 1 metre deep. The water was clean and clear most of the time. Ten to fifteen crocs lived in the overall enclosure and would all move into the winter house in bad weather and at night. If one opened the door to the winter house, all the crocs would usually charge out of two tunnels leading back to their main dam and return later, once we had left.

The two 'man-eaters' were now used to the new environment. One day I opened the door and we stood at the end of the elongated water body. I stood near the water. All the crocs rushed out as usual including the male 'man-eater' – all, that is, with the exception of the female with the truncated tail. She slipped into the pool stealthily and from the far end began to stalk me slowly and determinedly. An ominous sight. I was to be her next victim, she probably thought. We had found our man-eater!

I withdrew a safe distance before she broke water and peered at me with disappointment before slipping back into the pool where she remained ever hopeful. We called Nature Conservation and confirmed the suspicions of all.

Without a tail it must have been difficult for her to capture her normal prey – catfish and any other creature that could be secured in or near the water. She no doubt found humans a slow moving and easy target. The male most likely just joined in for the meal once she had secured a victim – the mystery had been solved.

I never go within 3 m or 4 m of any river, dam or lake where crocs abound and would advise that others follow suit.

Some of our crocs had outgrown an enclosure – I guess they were around 2.5 m – and needed moving to a larger home. We

could drug them and move them, but I decided not to drug them as it was quite easy to overdose and kill the creatures. I felt we had enough manpower to move them using our own strength. We had moved crocs by hand many times before, but usually not when they were larger than 2 m. We were not very experienced as regards crocodile relocation.

There were four of us available on the day. Generally one would manoeuvre a sack over the crocodile's head with a pole and it would remain quite motionless in its position. I was to climb over the wall and at the word 'go' would dive on the croc, grasping it fully around the neck with my head pressed down against his on the sack whilst the other three subdued it, pinning it to the ground ready for lifting. I will not mention the names of the other three, to save them embarrassment for their cowardly behaviour.

On the word 'go' I leapt forward as planned, but on wrapping my arms around the crocodile I experienced a power I had not anticipated. The croc's reaction was so violent that the other three jumped out of the enclosure to safety, leaving me clinging to the unmanageable beast. It twisted, then began to roll towards the water: the infamous crocodile death roll. We hit the water, both thrashing. I could not let go as the crocodile was doing all in its power to bite my head and its open jaw was now side-on against the side of my head. One wrong move and he would clamp his jaws around my head and face. He continued his roll in the water and it felt as if one was in a washing machine, I imagined.

So violent was his roll that he broke free of my grip; his jaws snapped shut in front of my face, cracking like a rifle shot, then disappeared into the water. I scrambled up away from the pool and crocodiles and stood shaking on the island. My shirt had been ripped off and a good deal of skin had been scraped raw, from my face down to my belly, including my arms and knees. I

must have looked a real sight, dripping both blood and water. I left the park and went home for a shower.

Once home I took a warm shower and as I came out of the cubicle my good friend Roderick turned up. He took one look at me and had a great deal to say about my appearance. My wife, who at this point was beyond shock as she half expected this type of thing most days of her life, simply provided me with a change of clothing and made us some coffee. I might add that we found a safer way to move the crocs.

## **Grizzly bear attack**

During late 1977, my business partner Peter had received word that two baby grizzly bears were for sale from a breeder in Natal. Two grizzlies for our new zoo – fantastic, I thought. These were purchased; raising the cubs began in Peter's home and lasted for several months until virtually all his possessions had been destroyed by them.

Meanwhile we were painstakingly completing construction of our rustic rural zoo outside Cape Town. A cuter animal than a baby bear you can hardly find. The baby bears would cling to one's leg like a furry growth and raise all hell if any attempt was made to pry them loose. The problem with grizzly bears is that they grow up, and up and up.

At last the zoo had been completed and was ready to open. It was well received by all and sundry. The zoo was quite delightful and hosted a number of animals, reptiles, birds and a ridiculous donkey whose speciality was creeping up on one, then braying into one or other ear at the top of his voice, causing near heart failure every time!

We had a monkey who was a deceptive thief with a sick sense of humour. He would lure his victim to the wire, feigning affection. When he had lulled his unsuspecting victim into a sense of trust and good cheer, he would deftly snatch some item of value out of a shirt or jacket pocket and retreat to a perch just out of reach. At this point he would examine the stolen item as if interested in it, and then in a display of apparent utter boredom, break the item – glasses, a pen, box of cigarettes, etc. into little pieces and toss them heedlessly to the ground. Many of his victims, I am sure, would have gladly wrung his scrawny neck if they were able to.

I remember my father visiting one day. He was standing peering into the crocodile enclosure when one of our parrots, a



tame bird, flew – of all places – into the open croc enclosure and landed at the water's edge to drink. A bit like going for a beer in a lion's den. As I walked past I asked my father what it was he found so interesting in the croc enclosure. He mentioned that our parrot had come to drink water out of the croc dam. Parrot? – Croc Dam?

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘So what happened?’

‘One of the crocs ate it,’ he said drily – can you imagine that? Such was life at the zoo.

When I met my wife, Dawn (I didn't know she was my wife as yet) I chose to take her to a ‘secret destination’ – the zoo – at night – no torch, no lights, in a fit, I think, of masculine bravado, hoping to clinch the boyfriend/girlfriend deal with my acts of clear bravery and prowess. A twit of note I was!

As we alighted from my vehicle and adjusted our eyes to the dark, the donkey performed its ‘party trick’, almost causing Dawn to collapse in a trembling heap. I had forgotten the large baboon brought to us by Nature Conservation from Cape Point where it had been captured after terrorising motorists. It was in a large trap cage ready for introduction to its new ‘prison’ the following day. As we walked past the notorious beast, it lunged out, gripping my ample hair and drew me into the steel of its trap with a loud bang. It was twice as strong as I in my prime and tried to bite my head through the openings in the steel mesh! I wrestled myself free leaving a good portion of hair behind.

Things were not going well. Dawn was at this time probably reconsidering life on the continent, never mind with me as I led her deeper into the dark and wooded zoo!

Now it was the turn of the rattlesnake. I felt the animals had conspired, in a supreme act of revenge for my incarcerating them, to bring this evening to disastrous ruin, foiling this Romeo's chances of any favourable outcome.

The rattlesnake was a large, very large, diamond back rattlesnake and it chose this still I can hear a pin drop night to

produce a long ominous rattle, using his oversized rattle like a Mexican dancer with multiple castanets. Before I could speak, I found Dawn in my arms – not because she was attracted to my irresistible body, but because she needed to get her feet off the ground to avoid the ‘imminent attack of the castanet rattlesnake’.

From not good to worse! I had one last trick up my sleeve to redeem the evening: Show her Caesar, the half tame Cape mountain leopard, I thought. This large, heavy leopard purred like a V-8 engine and enjoyed a scratch through the wire. He also had a mean streak, however, which he was NOT going to show tonight – I prayed.

As we approached the enclosure I noticed he was nowhere to be seen. O God, I thought. He is going to do it – his mean bit I meant. As we reached the wire he exploded out of a dark corner, fangs bared and snarling. He hit the fence in full flight. Dawn was thrust backward with the subtle energy of this mock attack and I had to help her, limp from shock, back to the vehicle!

MORAL – You own a zoo? Don’t do what I did – ever.

We did not talk much that night. Oddly enough, we have been married for 31 years.

A grizzly bear is a monster. This bulky, tall, fast, strong, determined animal plays second fiddle to no-one. We were not animal trainers so we weren’t able to tame and train the behemoths.

When constructing their enclosure we were low on funds – zoos usually are – and we used 12 mm weld mesh to construct their ‘permanent’ enclosure. 12 mm – candy floss for a large grizzly!

They remained in their enclosure – I am sure, out of habit alone, as they could have ‘walked’ through the mesh at any time having now reached adulthood. Their diet was mostly dead chicken.

It was on the cards: sooner or later they would break out. Talk about Prison Break. We had Prison Break 1 and 2 – could have had a series!

I was away at the time of the first escape. Don't forget – no cell phones in those days. The bears, now closer to 3 m when standing erect on their back legs, had playfully parted the weldmesh and were on the hunt. No chicken on the menu tonight.

Some distance from the zoo there were three rudimentary mud huts. Local labourers occupied the huts with their families and dogs. The smell of cooking and dogs had attracted the bears. As one of the labourers later related, one of the dogs was alerted to something in the dark. It started barking and before they could react, a giant animal bore down on the dog. What does a dog do when he is chased? Runs back into the house, of course!

So, the dog ran into the hut to escape the bear and the bear ran into the hut to catch the dog, taking out the door frame and surrounding brick work as he entered, then passed straight through the wall at the back of the hut, leaving a gaping hole – roughly shaped like a grizzly bear, I thought silently to myself.

The bears, unable to find the dogs, and not being able to find the human occupants who had excelled themselves at legging it out of the place, wandered back to the zoo where they caused general mayhem. One of the labourers arrived at Peter's house and described the attack by this giant, brown furry creature – Peter needed no further explanation.

A friend of ours, who worked at an institution where dart guns were a necessary tool, was summonsed to help – dart gun in hand. Later that night the bears were successfully incarcerated. The cage was repaired and no incident occurred for some months.

NOW IT WAS MY TURN

The call came. "The bears are out – come NOW".

This was Peter's frantic voice. I raced to the zoo. It was 9 p.m. on a dark night. Earlier in the day we had cut gum poles from the surrounding gum forest for a new enclosure. These poles were approximately 1.9 m or 2 m long, 100 mm in diameter, wet and heavy. They were stacked near the car park. As I scrambled from my truck I hesitated, not knowing what I was to face. Then grace caused me to arm myself with one of the felled, trimmed poles. It was hard to lift and carry and seemed an impossible weapon to wield. It was all I had. In the next moments I experienced what so many hapless American adventurers must have experienced in the forests of North America – a full on bear attack. Not any bear: A GRIZZLY BEAR!

Only one who has experienced such an event could appreciate the awesome size of a grizzly bear raised on its hind legs, close to 3 metres above the ground, and the terror it instils. Arms built like giant furry legs, paws like dinner plates with claws centimetres long and the tongue, oh the tongue and the lips!

The bear, looming large out of the darkness, bore down on me, not fast but at a steady pace. Upright, arms outstretched, claws protruding, lips turned back, huge yellow teeth exposed and the tongue lunging outwards towards me as it roared a bear roar I had never heard before.

Thank God for that companion – adrenaline. I felt the pole in my hands, at first too heavy, now just right! I swung the pole and struck the bear on the forehead, a loud crack followed by mixed emotions. I have killed the bear – I cracked its skull – or I cracked the pole – now what??

The bear sank onto its haunches, perhaps fatally wounded. NOT ON YOUR BL\*\*\*Y LIFE! He probably thought he had just been massaged. He rose again, this time on all fours. As it appeared he was about to advance for the second time he turned and followed Peter, who had all the while been frantically waving a chicken in the background hoping to lure the bear away from

me ... it worked! As Peter trotted past the door of the enclosure, the bear hot on his heels, he tossed the chicken through the door. The bear skidded, made a sharp right, grabbed the chicken, sat on his backside and began crunching away ...

We wired up the cage.

We sold the bears. I heard they broke out of their new enclosure as well. I don't know what happened; I didn't want to. I was done with bears!

## **The nine lives of Fabulous Freddie**

I can't remember how Freddie came to be employed by us but there he was – thin-lipped, wry smile, 1.7 m tall with an exceptional wit. We loved and hated him. He consumed alcohol regularly after hours until he was almost unconscious. An alcoholic would have thought him extreme!

When sober, however, he was worth his weight in gold.

Freddie could service a vehicle, clean, fix, man the cashier's desk, entertain visitors to the Reptile Park, crack jokes that split our sides and was creative. He looked vaguely noble in an Arabic sort of way.

He lived on the premises and doubled up as a night watchman until he went to bed or passed out from alcohol consumption, whichever came first.

In the mornings when we turned up to begin the day, Freddie had usually cleaned up, opened the doors and cheerfully greeted us with some quip or the other.

Freddie had a charmed life, as you will soon learn. We had acquired two cascabels – South American rattlesnakes which you would never want to encounter. Ours were green and black with other leaf-litter colours. These large rattlesnakes rivalled any of the worst tempered snake species alive. They were always on the defensive and poised to strike when approached, heads held high in a half loop of the upper body. One could not go near without precipitating a violent reaction. The worst feature of the snake was its venom – sometimes referred to as 'break neck' venom. After being bitten and before death, the venom would paralyse the muscles in the neck region and the head would flop about unsupported. A complete horror show, ending in death most often. We had no serum for this snake in South Africa. No staff were allowed near them. I usually tended to them personally and with great care.

One morning I was conducting my usual inspection of the park. As I approached the cascabel enclosure I was alarmed to see the door ajar. There was Freddie inside the enclosure cleaning away in a dream, totally unconcerned, while the two near-frantic rattlesnakes, poised and ready to strike, were within very close range! Why they hadn't bitten him is a complete mystery. I stood at the door staring at this spectacle in disbelief.

'Freddie,' I said as quietly and calmly as I could, 'what are you doing?'

'Cleaning,' he replied, completely missing the point.

'Freddie,' I said. 'STOP.'

'Yes, Sir,' he replied.

'Now, Freddie, move slowly to the door!'

He shuffled slowly towards me and the door, the snakes now ever more frantic.

'NOW GET OUT,' I said. I shut the door. 'WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DOING?' I demanded.

'I just wanted to help clean,' he said. I locked the door and confiscated the keys to that cage.

As soon as I could I shipped the specimens off to an institute in Natal. I couldn't bear the prospect of one of our staff dying in front of me with no hope of remedy.

The croc farm in Oudtshoorn had sold four crocodiles to us. The drive from Cape Town to Oudtshoorn is a pleasant one so my wife accompanied me along with Freddie in tow in our small Nissan pick-up, complete with canopy.

Freddie was my helping hand as we would have to load and offload the crocs. They were not large, about 1.5 – 1.8 metres. The crocs were drugged for us so we loaded and embarked on the return journey. Freddie sat in the back monitoring the crocs, splashing water on them from time to time to keep them cool in the summer heat. We entered Cape Town and were on the motorway – the last leg of our journey. Suddenly we heard a series of thuds from the rear.

‘What on earth was that?’ I said to Dawn. There was a small window between the cab and the back of the van.

‘The crocs are waking up prematurely,’ she replied. Drugging crocs was not a precise science and now they were waking up!

‘Freddie!’ I shouted. ‘Sit near the back at their tails, we are almost home.’ We heard more thudding from the back.

I increased my speed a little. I did not want to become party to the first multiple crocodile attack in a vehicle in history. Even more thuds followed.

‘What’s Freddie doing?’ I said to Dawn, concentrating on the road.

‘He looks terrified; the crocs are really becoming lively!’ Even louder thuds.

‘What’s Freddie doing now?’ I said.

No answer came for a minute, then panic-stricken: ‘Freddie isn’t there anymore!’

‘What do you mean not there?’

‘He’s gone – he is not in the back.’

I must have been travelling at 70 or 80 km per hour. In dread I began to slow and pull over, my heart in my mouth.

Freddie has baled out of the canopy window and is lying injured or dead on the highway ... what have I done?

I stopped to quickly close the canopy window to prevent the crocs from escaping through it before turning around to look for Freddie. As I ran around the back to the open window, a familiar voice came from above.

‘I am here,’ the voice said.

I looked for the source of the sound. ‘Freddie, what the !?#! are you doing up there?’ I said with a deep sense of relief.

‘Holding on,’ he said with his usual wit.

The canopy had high ridges, hardly hand-holds. When finally one of the crocs had begun to turn around towards him, he decided on investigating other opportunities, such as the roof of the canopy. The last thuds we heard weren’t the crocs, but



Freddie making good his escape! We all laughed out loud, with relief I suppose.

It was another routine day at the Park.

‘Freddie,’ I said, ‘the anacondas have defecated in their pool – please clean it out.’

There are two species of anaconda, both found in South America – the green anaconda and the yellow anaconda. Green anacondas are the heaviest snakes in the world and rival the reticulated python in Asia in length, reaching in excess of 25 ft. The yellow anaconda is a smaller snake, not exceeding 12 ft. We had yellow anacondas. They were large specimens, almost three times thicker than my arm.

Anacondas have very long teeth and can deliver a very nasty bite. They have a mean disposition on the whole and are very muscular. They spend a great deal of their lives in water, where they hunt. Of course, if you spend so much time in water you also poo there. Our largest anaconda was a fairly trustworthy animal and so one could fairly easily retrieve him from the enclosure and place him on the ground if cleaning was required.

Ever obliging, Freddie was off to carry out his duty. He was needed elsewhere as well, so I was anxious for him to complete this simple task as quickly as possible. At one point I turned to our cashier and said: ‘What on earth has taken Freddie so long? It doesn’t take this long to clean out the pool.’

Fed up, I marched around the Park inside the long corridor down to the lowest end of the passage at the far end of the Park where no doubt I would find Freddie loafing. It was rather dark in the passage and when I was close to the enclosure I saw a form on the brick paving but couldn’t quite make it out. At that moment I heard a gurgling sound. I realised it was Freddie’s form on the ground and the gurgling sound was coming from his mouth. I sprinted the last few metres and pulled the Anaconda off him, releasing its deadly hold on his neck. Another two or three minutes and he would have been lifeless.

Later, when he regained his voice, he stated the obvious. ‘That bloody snake nearly strangled me,’ he complained in his best Cape Flats accent, as if I was unaware of the fact! Being fairly good natured – the snake that is – he had placed it around his shoulders whilst cleaning. The next thing he knew he couldn’t breathe anymore, sank to the ground and blacked out. His nine lives were diminishing.

My Nissan van’s front wheel wasn’t properly balanced and the tyre had worn on the inside. When I noticed it there seemed to be wire showing in the severely worn rubber. Freddie had once been employed by a tyre fitment company in his varied life and ‘knew’ tyres. I called Freddie over and put the following question to him. ‘Freddie, you get the thick rubber of the tyre and when that wears smooth there seems to be a canvas-like material, and if you look here you will see some steel showing through the rubber. What comes after the steel?’

‘The blow-out,’ he said smiling wryly through his thin lips. Such was Freddie’s wit.

Well, he soon had occasion to smile a little less. A few large male crocs were in an enclosure at one end of the Park. Freddie’s accommodation was roughly 100 m from this enclosure. It was croc mating season and the males were fighting sporadically amongst each other. I’m not quite sure whether this particular croc was trying to escape the other males or find the females, but whatever the reason, he managed to scale the 1.4 m high wall (crocs are not good climbers) separating the men from the girls. Once over the wall he started wandering about the park, perhaps looking for his date for the evening. Freddie meanwhile had managed to consume enough alcohol to kill a camel and was semi-conscious on his bed. I should mention it was a home-made bed 300 mm or 400 mm above the floor. In the heat of the summer he had chosen to sleep with the door open, and why not? There were no dangerous animals to pose a threat. I was

asleep at home whilst the most bizarre of events was busy being played out on the Cape Flats.

Conradie Hospital is a well-known hospital – a sort of landmark. On weekends, I am led to believe, the emergency ward is like a war zone. Rape victims, stabbing victims, gunshot victims, blunt trauma to the head victims being admitted at a pace – gangsters pursuing their gravely injured victims into the hospital to ‘finish the job’ – a place to be avoided by the faint hearted.

A friend of ours, Dr. Naomi Knorr, was chief here. A tough emergency doctor, she was able to take control of this emergency ward for years facing this never-ending onslaught of violence perpetrated by man against his fellow man. One can only stand in awe of such dedicated medical professionals.

Freddie was now in a deep drunken slumber. Our amorous croc didn't have the exact address of his 'Juliet', so was wandering about the passages in the park hoping to end his night in reptilian passion.

He entered Freddie's room and walked straight under the bed, catching the rough protrusions on his back on the underside of Freddie's bed. The bed was now in motion!

As Freddie later related: 'I was so drunk I thought the bed was moving around the room by itself.' He opened his eyes hoping to blink away the nausea and illusion of the moving bed, when he noticed that the bed had indeed changed position. Puzzled, he peered over the edge of his bed and saw two large grey feet.

I must be really drunk, he thought. Through his alcohol stained mind he also noticed a long dark tail protruding from the far end of the bed, curved slightly to within his vision.

'n Krokodil! he blurted to himself, now panic-stricken, and sat bolt upright.

Escape was essential, so he stood up and jumped out of the bed almost on top of the croc's head. The croc, in no mood for competition on his special night, swiped at Freddie's legs with its

ample head. Freddie was upended and landed back on the ground, where the crocodile seized his wrist and hand and gave him a most grievous bite before releasing him. The bite had severed blood vessels in his arm and now he was bleeding out. He staggered to the office and telephoned the emergency number at Conradie Hospital.

A young doctor answered the phone and enquired as to the nature of the emergency.

‘I have been bitten by a crocodile and am bleeding badly,’ came a slurred answer.

The doctor apparently turned to all within earshot and said ‘Now I’ve heard everything. This drunk has been attacked by a crocodile on the Cape Flats!’

He would probably have put the receiver down except for an act of Divine intervention. Dr Knorr was one of the people who heard the doctor’s comment. She immediately said, ‘Ask him who he works for.’

‘Mr Fred at the Snake Park,’ he answered.

‘Send an ambulance immediately,’ she commanded.

He was in a bad way but the fine team of doctors at Conradie Hospital patched him up well. They returned him before dawn, as there were no beds available in the hospital. We are still not sure if Freddie contacted the newspapers or if someone in the hospital alerted a night reporter, but whatever the case, Freddie had been photographed shortly after sunrise posing with his bandaged arm in a sling at the entrance to the Snake Park, his usual wry smile all over his face. The newspaper printed the fantastic story of his escapades during the evening and his brush with death. He hadn’t gone back to bed, mainly because the croc was still in his room.

That morning I had intended to sleep in. I drove to the local store to pick up a few provisions. I walked past the newspaper stand and found myself staring at Freddie on the front page of the paper.

Freddie moved on to a new job some time later. I can't say I blame him, but wherever he is, he was a real star!

## **Perfect irony or Destiny deferred**

Can one interfere with destiny? Can destiny be delayed?

It seems that even in the animal kingdom, let alone amongst us humans, destiny weaves its inevitable web.

Having purchased our farm in the Waterberg biosphere in 2003, I noticed an absence of pythons on the farm and in the district in general. Having spoken to the farmer who had sold us our farm, and other farmers in the district, as well as speaking to farm hands, we discovered that over the years pythons had been killed in numbers to prevent them from taking calves and valuable game; pythons were nowhere to be found. To remedy this, I obtained permits, constructed a large beautiful and natural enclosure and introduced a good sized female python with a suitable mate. African rock pythons are the largest snake species in southern Africa and have been known to reach five metres or more. I know big pythons used to abound in this district. Some 35 years before the purchase of our farm, I had been on a capturing expedition near Ellisras with colleagues when we drove onto a farm hoping to seek permission to scout the banks of the Mogol river for large mambas, pythons and cobras the following morning. There we met with an extremely friendly farmer who, with the usual Bushveld hospitality, invited us in for coffee and sandwiches, where he entertained our request with bemusement. During our conversation he had indicated that some fifteen years earlier they had killed a large python – the biggest he had ever seen – and had kept the skin. Curious, we enquired as to the size of the creature.

‘Oh, around 22 feet!’ he exclaimed.

We were used to these stories of gigantic reptiles and discounted them; usually, like in old fisherman’s tales, the snake had grown in the mind of the story teller and reached

proportions way beyond the actual size. We humoured him, indicating that it must have been a record for the district.

Before we could move on to the next topic, he suddenly blurted out: 'Would you like to see the skin?'

Now, this was most unusual, as he had indicated the size of the snake and was now prepared to come up with the goods!

'Most certainly!' we exclaimed, realising that we were possibly about to be treated to something extraordinary. We followed him across the lawn to a storeroom next to his parking garage. We all waited anxiously on the lawn as he unlocked the steel door and disappeared into the gloomy storeroom.

Presently he emerged, carrying a large object shaped like a 44 gallon drum, clutching it to his chest, with arms outstretched around the object and with his hands not quite meeting. I figured in the failing light that he was indeed carrying a 45 gallon drum into which he had stuffed the snake skin.

As he drew closer, I noticed patterning on the object; my jaw dropped as I realised that the object was not a drum but the skin itself.

He placed it on the lawn, then laying it on the grass began to roll it out, asking me to pin the tail section down. None of us could believe what we were seeing. The skin was roughly 1.2 metres wide. I asked one of my colleagues to pace out the skin, and indeed it was 21 feet! Snake skins can be stretched in the length and the width once the skin has been removed from the dead snake, but even so, this was the largest python that I had seen and my only regret was that I did not photograph and measure correctly and record its size, as I have not heard of or seen a larger python.

We had captured pythons of 15½ feet on occasion; these were large, powerful animals capable of swallowing small antelope and calves. This giant could have been 25 or 30 years old, or more, and would have grown to this admirable size in

pristine bushveld where it would have lived undisturbed until 1953 when it met its death at the hands of the farmer.

Our female python was intended for breeding so that we could release its progeny in the district; thereby once again bringing a healthy population of pythons to the bushveld on our farm and surrounding areas, to help restore the balance of what we felt was necessary biodiversity in this region. For a python of some 4.9 metres, the approximate size of our female, to feed on small prey such as chickens, would be rather like an adult human eating a handful of peas. So we put out the word to farmers that any dead calves and the like would be welcome once in a while. We received word that a goat farmer in the district slaughtered his excess male goats as he was a goat milk farmer and had no use for the males. We approached the farmer and offered to pay him a small fee for young slaughtered goats once per month.

As it turned out, he was not as callous as we had thought and did not relish killing the young goats, so thrust two young goats upon us, still very much alive and kicking, at R60 each. Instead of both being males, one was indeed a female! As it turned out, he had too many goats and was now offloading males and females that season. The little goats were bundled into the back of the truck and off we travelled to our farm, some distance away. I had softened in my maturing years, and on arriving at our farm took one look at the delightful pair of bleating kids and immediately realised I was not going to be able to present them to the python. I was afraid the python was going to have to get used to chicken and that was that!

Dawn, my wife, instantly fell in love with the goats; within a day they were part of the family. They were named Jack and Jill and needed to be bottle-fed twice a day, which was quite a performance. An hour before feeding time they would call us incessantly until either Dawn or I arrived with two one-litre bottles filled with warm milk, where they latched onto the giant teats on the bottles and hungrily devoured the milk. They would



then follow all and sundry around the farm playing King of the Castle every time they passed a rocky outcrop, the one playfully butting the other off the highest point. This is one of the reasons they were called Jack and Jill – because they were always going up the hill.



### **Dawn, Jack and Jill**

If perchance they managed to nip into the farmhouse, they would climb the couches, chairs and dining room table – managing to wreck everything in sight within seconds. They thought nothing of urinating on the furniture and leaving an unimaginable smell in their wake as they were tackled and removed. We became very fond of the goats and these were now our ‘kids’ – a part of the family.

Well, this family affair went on for 6 months until they were weaned. They then joined our small herd of Kalahari Red goats and were free to roam the farm, grazing with the Kalahari Reds. These milk goats were pure white and the Kalahari Reds often

victimised them, seemingly not approving of their pure white coats. Presently the goats all became friends and all was well in the goat camp.

So, python was doing well on chicken and nearing her first breeding season. Jack and Jill, although visiting us from time to time during the day, whiled away their time eating all and sundry with the Kalahari Reds, and so life settled down in this manner.

We have a vlei of some 25 hectares on the farm, with a river and a large swampy area – some areas are almost impenetrable. In time the goats found the lush vegetation in the vlei irresistible and so at least a portion of the day was spent in the swamps, out of sight and out of mind. It is hard to forget the following events.

David and Knowledge, our two trusted farm hands, placed delectable goat pellets into the goats' kraal each afternoon before dusk to lure them into safety, safe from the leopards and hyenas which had preyed on our goats over the preceding months, before knocking off for the day. At around 5 p.m. there was a knock on the door; our staff indicated that Jill had not returned from her foraging in the vlei.

'Well,' I said, 'go and look for her ; you know where she is likely to be – and do so before dark before the leopards and hyenas find her.'

I settled down to some paperwork when presently there was a frantic knock on the door. There I met David and Knowledge. What they had to say left me rooted to the spot. They had penetrated a section of dense reeds near the river. There was a large python which had succeeded in securing Jill by the snout in its large jaws – all 120 odd teeth in the python's jaws were sunk into her, with several coils constricting her young body. I immediately instructed them to run back to the vlei as fast as they could. I must say at this point that David and Knowledge had been trained to capture all species of snakes that occurred on the farm, except for black mambas, which they were forbidden to capture, for obvious reasons.

As they hightailed it back to the vlei, I shouted after them with as much authority as I could muster: 'Save the goat, catch the python and bring them both back!' I could have gone with them but alas, instinctively, I already knew the outcome. I decided rather to prepare Dawn for the inevitable. Some 50 minutes later there was a more subdued knock at the door. Dawn was sitting on a couch in the lounge awaiting the news. I opened the door and David stood at the threshold holding the limp body of Jill, her life constricted out of her by the python, blood still dripping from the multiple tooth punctures on her face. 'Where is the python?' I shouted.

'It got away,' he retorted, 'slipping into the river before we could secure a proper hold on it.'

Dawn was clearly mortified but quiet – bless her. I stood for a while taking in the events, then instructed the men to bury the goat immediately in a place where I would later plant a small tree. After dismissing the men I sat down with Dawn, poured us each a large glass of red wine and reflected on the irony of the events. Here was a dear little goat which should have been slaughtered at birth. We intervened by purchasing her, intended as a meal for our captive breeding female python. The life of the doomed goat was elevated to a more noble status and it became part of the family. It seems Nature's intention was greater and more powerful than ours and that she was to become the victim of a python despite our change of heart and our greatest efforts. Such perfect irony, I thought; a destiny deferred.

## **Reasons never to visit a zoo or snake park**

Never forget that a zoo, snake park and animal farms are normally founded and staffed by people who are absolutely passionate about these creatures. Most develop a profound knowledge through formal and informal studies and the creatures are usually well loved and taken care of.

Animals, of course, were designed to live unrestricted in the wild and not in an enclosure. Alas, because of loss of habitat, some species today only exist in enclosures in zoos and animal parks; in time to come there will be many more like these. They will have become extinct in their natural state and exist only in captivity. It is therefore a blessing that there are so many dedicated people whose lives are devoted to conservation.

Now, because animals are used to being in a natural state and unrestricted, when they get placed in an enclosure, the enclosure has to be animal/snake proof and the door should be kept SHUT, especially since most zoos and snake parks are in cities and suburbs. I do not know of a single institution of this type where animals, some extremely dangerous, have not escaped – sometimes with dreadful results. After a number of incidents at our zoo and snake and crocodile park, I remember mentioning to my wife one day that she should never take the children to a zoo or a snake park. She knew what I meant.

At our zoo, amongst the many creatures we had five beautiful large adult black mambas, all between 2.8 and 3.5 metres long. These are average large mambas for that time – 30 odd years ago. Almost all of them were captured on the banks of the Limpopo River, one of our favourite localities for capturing mambas. The mambas here were often an attractive olive brown in colour, long and heavy bodied and with a more gentle disposition than one would normally expect from a black mamba. Mambas are never black, but are so named for the pitch inky-

black colour inside the mouth which they readily show you when nervous by gaping and making threatening gestures with their head and neck, which is usually raised off the ground. To see this display behind a sheet of glass is very interesting, but it's not so interesting if the snake is right in front of you. The enclosure our five mambas lived in was large – approximately 6 metres long, 3 metres wide and just over 2 metres high. We had built a beautiful cliff face to the rear of the enclosure with an attractive and natural looking cave more or less in the centre. The cave was well lit and had overhead and underfloor heating to make sure our mambas were comfortable.

The mambas had become quite tame and in time I was able to walk into the enclosure and hold food out in my unprotected hand, whereupon one or more mambas would come over, steadily and gently, and then lift the head and 1 to 1.5 metres of body up into the air, slowly retrieving the food before retreating a little and consuming it. I only did this feeding trick in private when there were no visitors. This type of trust which can develop between man and beast is quite something to behold, especially when the beast is a wild captive mamba, nervous and uncompromisingly deadly.

During the week we had large numbers of school children visit the zoo. On this particular day a group of nursery school children were visiting, a group of around 15 or 20 four or five year-olds. At that age they really love the zoo and all the creatures – and we loved watching them as they watched everything else. Just past the black mamba enclosure was a demonstration area. I would climb into the demonstration pit and spend 20 minutes or half an hour talking to the children and allowing them to touch a harmless snake whilst they all shrieked away.

They were approaching the black mamba enclosure when I decided to stroll up behind them and get ready to give the demonstration as they moved on to the demonstration area. The teacher was reading off the signage on the cage to the children

and telling them in a hushed voice that this was the most deadly and longest venomous snake in Africa and they were quietly oohing and aahing at the information that was being fed to them.

The mambas were lying mostly in the cave with bodies looped out and over branches and rocks which made up the landscape around the cave. How magnificent they looked, I thought. Ever alert, their heads were raised, supported by slender elegant necks peering at the children outside. Four heads – not five ...

Where is #5? I thought. Its head may be tucked in under the other snakes. My eyes began to shift around in my skull as they searched every corner of the cage and the cave, over and over. The fifth mamba wasn't there – it was missing – GONE. I stood frozen.

And then I began to look on the ground and in the shrubs around the enclosure. They had been there less than an hour ago – I had seen them all, so the snake could not be far! The roof of the cage was corrugated iron sheeting with Victorian profile clear sheeting protruding some 15 cm or 20 cm over the front of the top of the cage. There was a broad piece of timber which was secured to the top of the masonry work onto which the roof timbers and roof were fixed. My eyes were drawn to a movement in this area – and there it was – a large 3 metre, heavy-bodied black mamba resting on this timber – body stretched out, head and neck protruding three quarters of a metre out into the air above the children!

None of them had spotted it. Its tongue was waving, as is characteristic of mambas tasting the air, and every time there was an eruption of movement from the children below, the mamba would jerk his head back ever so slightly and gape. My body erupted in gooseflesh, shuddering as I took this all in. This snake could easily topple off the timber as there was nowhere for it to hold onto properly. If one of the teachers walked directly under it, there was almost no doubt that the snake would bite. If it

panicked when they all moved off, it could fall off its timber support, landing amongst the children who would no doubt panic. In a situation like this the mamba would bite a number of children and there would more than likely be fatalities.

On many occasions in the bushveld, thirsty cattle have surrounded a mamba at a water hole, and we know of instances where several were killed by a single mamba. I was recently called to a farm to remove a mamba which had killed two magnificent stallions, a goat, a sheep and a pig – all at the same water hole.

My throat was so dry I could hardly speak and my eyes were filled with liquid, causing me to blink repeatedly. I knew I had to act immediately. In my quietest and gentlest voice I asked the two teachers standing furthest from the mamba's head if they could approach me and talk to me about something I wanted to show the children. In this way I lured them away from the possibility of walking under the mamba's head. I then asked them if they could get the children to move to the left quietly so as not to frighten the snakes in the cage. This they did and the children followed the teachers away from the mamba and the mamba cage.

I then led them around a separate path to the demonstration area and asked them to wait there until I came shortly to give them their demonstration. From the demonstration pit you could not clearly see the black mamba cage. I sprinted to the rear of the zoo and retrieved a hooked snake stick and ran back down to the mamba enclosure.

I reached up and slowly took hold of the mamba's tail and then slipped the hooked stick under it at mid-body and coaxed it gently off the timber. The mamba had become quite agitated and was not responding very well. It was too long to be handled with a hooked stick, but I had no choice. I walked backwards as the mamba began to raise its head and gape and show signs of wanting to advance on me. Just two or three seconds and I was at the door. I now had to unlock the door, which meant putting the mamba down. This was becoming really messy. Suddenly I

noticed the door was not closed! One of the attendants had been in the mamba cage, no doubt to change the water, and in a fit of unconscious negligence had walked off leaving the door ajar! I was able to slip the snake in the door, pinch its tail, whereafter it slid rapidly forward up the cliff face and went and lay snugly in the cave with his mates.

This event had quite a profound effect on me. The thought of all those children being in such danger was not something one could easily come to terms with. We resolved to do a thorough check of the zoo before allowing any member of the public to enter in future; during the day there would be rounds where safety would be the main objective. There are, however, I am afraid, events over which one can have no control. The following is one of those events.

Peter, my partner, arrived at the zoo one morning a little later than he should have. It was his morning to do the early shift. The previous day we had not been able to retrieve chickens from the chicken farm in the morning as usual, as the chicken farmer was experiencing some difficulty. The chickens were only retrieved once the dead had been removed from their batteries late in the afternoon. The zoo animals, as a result, had all eaten late, having skipped an extra 12 hours, in which they had grown quite hungry. Peter had left the zoo well after dark. That night the Cape south-easter blew fiercely across Cape Town.

So, he had arrived a bit late in the morning, the wind had died down and a nursery school had planned its outing to the zoo that day. They arrived almost at the same time as Peter. He did not want to make them all wait while he did his usual check in the zoo – figured he would let them in and then do his check a little later. I arrived as the school bus was moving off. I saw Peter standing at the cashier's cubicle staring at me. Why is he staring like that? I thought. I went up to greet him and he looked like he had seen a ghost, face white, blood having drained right out of it.



When Peter got nervous, or embarrassed, he would grin a silly grin and giggle in a high pitched tone. He was wearing a ridiculous grin ... and giggling.

‘OK, what’s up?’ I said.

His story was unearthly. During the night a large branch had snapped off a tree above Caesar the leopard’s enclosure, which tore through the wire netting of the roof. Caesar had seized the opportunity to climb out and go walkabout. Since he had been fed late instead of in the morning, and since Peter felt sorry for the animals being fed so late, he had thrown in a lot more chickens than necessary. Caesar, it seems, had spent the night climbing in and out of his enclosure, gorging himself on chickens and then going out to play.

Usually when Caesar had eaten, he would approach any one of us who happened to be passing and lean against the wire ready for a scratch whilst purring simultaneously. When the children, with their teachers, came walking past the cage, there he was, lying on the lawn in front of the cage! Peter was seated in the cash cubicle when the children and teachers emerged from the zoo. They thanked him, as patrons usually did, expressing their delight at the layout and all the wonderful creatures. The highlight of the whole visit, however, exclaimed a teacher, was that wonderfully tame leopard of yours that was rubbing itself against the children’s and the teachers’ legs and purring so loudly. They all had a chance to pat and stroke it, and the more they patted and stroked, the louder it purred, rubbing himself continuously against them.

Peter acknowledged her thanks and while they were readying themselves to depart, he walked straight up to Caesar’s cage, to find that it was all true – he was out ... and he HAD been walking amongst the nursery school children. He coaxed Caesar back into the cage quite easily through the enclosure door, which he had now opened, and two attendants were on the roof in a jiffy wiring the damage closed. The reason Caesar had not attacked, injured

or killed one or many of these children is obviously his late meal. He was always at his friendliest when his tummy was full. I never did like the way he looked at children visiting the zoo, the way he would stalk them from inside his cage, emitting low growls of disapproval when he couldn't get at them. I always thought that if he had a chance, he would go straight for the nearest child and that would be the end of it.

Hearing Peter relate this story caused me to feel sick to the very core.

## **Time to slow down**

I received another snake bite which put me in a coma. Then, one day, I entered a black mamba's enclosure and whilst moving nervously along the narrow space between the mambas and the enclosure's window I pricked myself on a thorn on one of the decorative branches. My body, convinced that a snake had bitten me, started to go into shock. There were many other events and I figured it was time to slow down. The gods will protect one for only so long, I am sure.

So, here I end my short stories for now. Thank you, Dawn, my dear wife. When all these events were taking place I did not think of them as remarkable at all. I was like a witness to this drama of nature which had to play itself out. So, each one should do his duty with love, courage, faith, earnestness and determination, and do not be too proud of yourself. We act on the stage of life but briefly and then exit – good luck to you all.



**The artist and author of the Introduction, Roderick John Freemantle**

## **A note on family**

Although our children never took to the bush life they were exposed to in their youth, they nonetheless were fearless when it came to snakes, and themselves captured specimens that wandered close to our properties.

Winston, our eldest son, has pioneered a most unusual and captivating life in China. Check him on [youtube.com/serpentza](https://www.youtube.com/serpentza) and [youtube.com/churchillcustoms](https://www.youtube.com/churchillcustoms). He is the first person in history to begin video logging out of Mainland China. Sara-Dawn, our daughter, and Rob her husband, a wonderful couple, live in Johannesburg, engage respectively in a field of education and health. Miles, our youngest son, returned from whence he came at age 7 ... God Bless him.



**Winston**



**Sara-Dawn**

## About the author

Frederick Sterzel, adept at catching venomous snakes or wrestling with a crocodile, is also a great fisherman. *The day I died* is a collection of real-life stories, told most graphically by a man who followed his childhood passion for snakes. As well as wildlife conservationist, he has also been a game capturer, the owner of zoos, crocodile parks and snake parks. A true adventurer, Frederick is married to Dawn and they have two children.

He actually dedicated his life to philosophy; between all the action and danger the reader will find signs of his wisdom, self-examination and compassion. There is also abundant wry and ironic humour.

