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RAINBOW DIARY

A Journey in the New South Africa



Rainbow Diary
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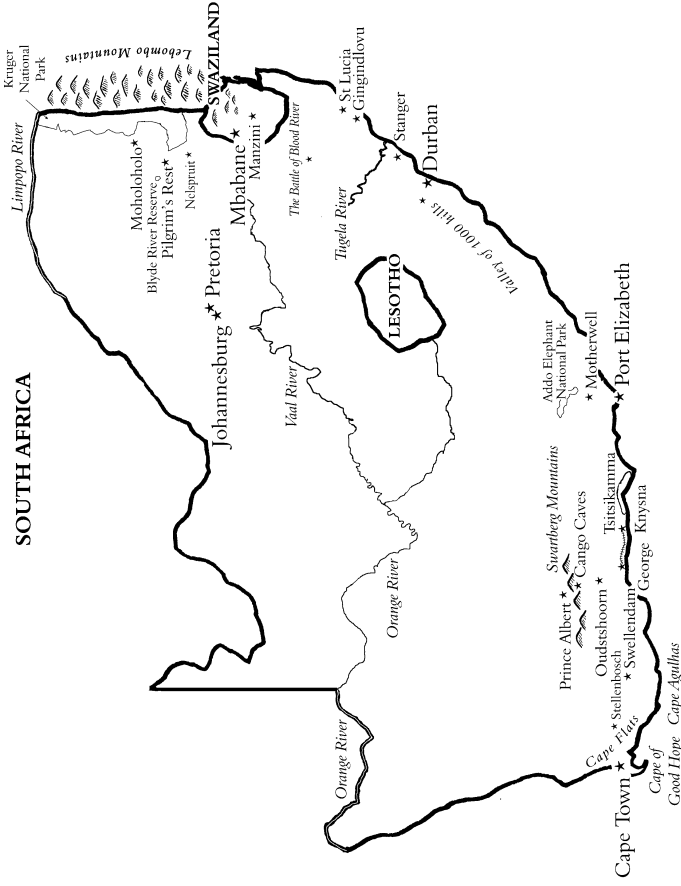
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To Víctor

CONTENTS

Prologue.....	11
One Tina Turner: Pretoria.....	14
Two Cruising in the Kruger: The Kruger Park.....	43
Three The Taliban in the Transvaal: Klein Drakensberg.....	70
Four The Baz Bus: Johannesburg to Mbabane.....	92
Five Swazi Sleaze: Swaziland.....	111
Six The Maid from Mozambique: St Lucia.....	135
Seven Mad Max IV – Tamin’ Durban: Durban.....	163
Eight Garden Rout(e) Port Elizabeth to Knysna.....	198
Nine Ostrich Operetta: Oudtshoorn, Klein Karoo.....	220
Ten African Drama: Cape Town, Robben Island, Cape Flats.....	253
Eleven A Shrimp Learns to Whistle: The Cape.....	292
Epilogue.....	331

SOUTH AFRICA



ATLANTIC
OCEAN

INDIAN
OCEAN



Prologue

I don't consider myself a backpacker. I find the whole world of backpackerdom a bit incestuous. You move from hostel to hostel meeting the same kind of people (anarcho-alternatives, stinky students or healthstrong hikers), you follow the same rules (*'Please take a beer and write your name in the book'*; *'Do not force the lock on the pool table'*; *'We do not lend pens – in fact we do not lend anything'*), and you are encouraged to stay away from the locals. Backpacker hostels are a perfect breeding ground for tomorrow's megacoach family tourist: self-contained (sleep, cook, eat, drink and socialise under the same roof), self-important (*'You're only spending five weeks in South Africa? We're here for six months'*) and finally self-defeating – are you really visiting a foreign country if you hang around with like-minded young Westerners? So I don't consider myself a backpacker. I hang around in the bars and the clubs of a new town, drink with the locals and make them tell me their stories. And on top of that I am a dorm's nightmare. Put me in the lower bunk and I'll knock my head on the top bed. Put me in the top bunk, and I'll want to go to the toilet four times in the course of the night. Oh, and I drag dry hides, as the Zulu say. This means I snore heavily. Dorms inspire my adenoids.

Plus in South Africa I tasted luxury. I was forced by circumstances to stay in a four-star hotel in Durban and what did it cost me? Twenty quid. I expected to rough it in the Kruger Park and I had a huge, superbly decorated three-man hut for myself. For the first time I started looking at the better hotels in the Lonely Planet guide. Could I really afford to stay

at the Edward Hotel in Port Elizabeth? I called. I could. I did. Luxury is like a drug: if I hadn't missed the occasional sociability of the backpacker's bus, who knows – I might have crammed my credit card with bills from luxurious, yet inexpensive, hotels. The exchange rate rocks.

It is perhaps because luxury *is* like a drug that the problems plaguing South Africa were generated and have persisted to this day. More than a hundred years ago, gold and diamonds started providing the elite of the country with a lifestyle which has to be lived in order for outsiders to comprehend why it was defended so ruthlessly. And many a time, since the larger, disadvantaged population of South Africa lives outside the cities, it was easy to forget how this high standard of living was attained.

Crime is therefore a big problem, which will not surprise anyone who knows that sharp divisions in a society create stress. But it does seem to surprise white South Africans. 'Perpetrators of crime act with impunity in the new South Africa,' they told me. One could argue, of course, that perpetrators of crime have *always* been able to act with impunity in South Africa, but a prologue is not the place for such arguments. It is, however, a place for creation myths.

It was Unkulunkulu, the ancestor of all ancestors, who broke off mankind from the reeds of the eastern swamps where the Indian Ocean meets the African continent. Unlike the version in Genesis, a man emerged simultaneously with a woman, for how could there have ever existed a male without his partner?

Unkulunkulu sent off two animals to greet mankind. He first dispatched a chameleon to bestow immortality to humans by announcing 'Let men not die!' Then, after granting the chameleon a good handicap, He sent a gecko with an opposite message of death. But the chameleon loitered on the way to eat the fruit of some bush; thus the gecko arrived first with the dreaded curse that has befallen the human race: 'Let men die.' By the time the chameleon arrived, it was too late.

PROLOGUE

Although the gecko is merely feared as a harbinger of death, the chameleon has been squarely blamed for mankind's mortality. Even today black Africans will avoid touching a chameleon and many a shepherd has killed one from a distance by blowing smoke at its open mouth.

It seems blind prejudice has deep roots in this land.

The reason I travelled to South Africa is to celebrate the 'New' and to understand what happened during the times of the 'Old', expecting to argue politics and meet obnoxious individuals. I don't know if they've all emigrated, but I didn't encounter a single white South African who was not friendly, hospitable, polite and, well, *nice* in an old-fashioned, Agatha-Christie-novel-without-the-hemlock kind of way. If anything came as a shock to me, it was how many friends I made and how much I enjoyed the company of even the ones with whom I disagreed fundamentally. The new South Africa is a reality they all seem to accept, many with fervour, some with a newly-found guilt and others with a mixture of apprehension, excitement, shock and, yes, pride. There may be crime and punishment in this life, but there is also redemption, and it's only around the corner for white South Africans, albeit disguised as a cheque-book.

This brings me to the title. If anything, this is less a travelogue and more a series of vignettes of the people I met and grew to like a lot. I must add that any similarity to persons, hotels, or even places is purely coincidental. (Is there really a town called Oudtshoorn? Is there really a club in Durban called 330?) I, myself, do not really exist. I never really travelled in South Africa.

And I never, *ever*, take drugs.



Chapter One

Tina Turner: Pretoria

My feelings for you, Hank, are like a bowl of fish-hooks
Meryl Streep to Leonardo DiCaprio in *Marvin's Room*

1. A long, drowsy Thursday

The South African Airways pilot on the Tannoy was one of these Afrikaners who speak in paragraphs, not sentences: *And now we leave the realm of the stars and descend to Johannesburg International where the temperature is twenty-five degrees. Remember I predicted twenty-five? Well, I was right! We are landing in the glowing sun having made a crossing from the cold and windy Europe over the whole of the continent of Africa, and the crossing was good. I hope the last bit of turbulence did not disturb too much that Indian lady who was terrified earlier. I hope she feels better...*

'A few of my drivers are like this,' said Jane, my next-seat neighbour. 'Once they start, they can't finish. They like the sound of their own voices.'

'... you can see the patches of blue amongst the green grass of the gardens below. It's swimming pools. Johannesburg has a greater concentration of swimming pools per square kilometre than Los Angeles...'

Jane was an ex-English teacher from Derby who had settled in the Western Cape, leading specialised flower-photography tours, and I was a drunk and dozy British tourist. During the overnight flight, Jane had suggested I tried Amarula liqueur which is a bit like Baileys with berries. ‘Elephants love it,’ she’d said. ‘They eat the semi-decomposed fruit of the marula tree and turn tipsy.’ Hell, if it can finish off an elephant, I’ll have five, please.

‘... but it’s time to land. I always ask for the music from the Chariots of Fire or one of Beethoven’s symphonies to play while we are descending, because this is what we all deserve.’

When our pilot finally paused for breath, the passengers applauded.

‘Is this the end of your trip?’ Jane asked as the low Cs in Beethoven’s Fifth made the plane doors rattle more than any turbulence we had experienced so far. I hope our Indian lady had a strong constitution.

‘Sort of,’ I said. ‘I’m staying in Pretoria. I’m being picked up at Jo’burg airport. And you?’

She made a long face. ‘I won’t be home for another eight hours. I have a connection with another flight to Cape Town and then I have to drive to the Karoo.’

The Karoo?

‘I live in a small town called Prince Albert, quite, quite far from Cape Town.’

I couldn’t hide my surprise. They named a town after a penile piercing?

Jane thought I was impressed. ‘I love the Karoo. It’s so quiet, so empty, so clear. Try to make it there, at least to Oudtshoorn. It’s the centre of the ostrich trade.’

I yawned. If all had gone according to plan, Jaco would be waiting for me outside.

When I decided to go to South Africa, everyone and his guidebook was against the idea. At best I would be robbed upon arrival; at worst I would be ritually sacrificed and my entrails used for witchcraft. I’d have to carry an Uzi on my

shoulder to walk about and drive a Challenger tank to avoid carjacking. I laughed off the first warning, but by the time I read *The South African Handbook's* comment on Johannesburg safety (*'We recommend you stay in Pretoria'*), I thought, 'Dammit, they might be right,' and followed their advice.

After passing through customs brandishing my bar-coded visa (they have computerised immigration in South Africa), I spotted the sign with my name on it. The guy who was holding it was Jaco, agent for Ulysses Tours: tall, blond and horribly, horribly healthy.

'Where are we going?' I asked as we found ourselves driving on a busy motorway, more of a German autobahn than the usual Third-World, unmaintained – and frequently, because of Nature, unmaintainable – B-road.

'Brooklyn,' Jaco said.

I tried to find Brooklyn on my map of Pretoria. It wasn't in the centre. It was far to the right. If it was further to the right, it would bump into Pik Botha himself.

'Is there public transport?' I asked innocently.

Jaco looked at me unmistakably in the negative. I cowered. 'It's one of the best 'burbs,' he said. 'You'll like it.'

By then we had reached Pretoria which consists of miles and miles of avenues of flowering jacarandas, all 70,000 of them imported from Rio de Janeiro in 1888. In October they were in full bloom, shading the street with their branches and cloaking the pavement with their exquisite mauve flowers. In the colour spectrum of this new Rainbow Nation, Pretoria must occupy the magenta end.

My B&B was on Duncan Street and nothing had prepared me for the sight. I said goodbye to Jaco and greeted the owner, Martin, a softly-spoken, silver-haired Afrikaner; he had turned on Maria Callas who was singing 'Casta Diva' in the living room. Bellini's marvellous aria matched the ambience: a central, hexagonal, domed hall was surrounded by doorways which led to the kitchen, the office, the veranda, the garden and the living room. On the sixth side, an art deco spiral staircase led

upstairs to the three guest rooms. In my London flat you can just about swing a cat around; in my double bedroom in Brooklyn you could swing a medium giraffe. I nearly pinched myself, but I thought that would wake me up and I didn't want to. I explored my environment: parquet floors, thick stinkwood furniture and a balcony overlooking the garden, where stone fish and amoretti spewing fresh water decorated the 35-foot swimming pool. Below me, in the *stoep*, there were four tables and fourteen wicker chairs under colonnades covered by large red velvet curtains.

Martin was keen to chat and offered me a drink. I declined as politely as I could. I needed to sleep and within minutes of lying down I was gone.

I woke up still drowsy. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. I looked around in a daze. The colonial furniture still appeared as fantastic as five hours ago.

I rubbed my eyes and went for a wash.

Damn! I thought I'd brought everything: Imodium tablets (as this, after all, was Africa), turbobhalers for those unaccustomed-to tropical flower allergies, hydroperiodide pills for water purification (with neutralising tablets to remove the taste of iodine), Trust underarm anti-perspirant (as perfected by the Israeli army, who must know a thing or two about itches and rashes), an anti-blister kit for feet (since this is the country of Great Treks), pills against malaria, insect repellent... *but no shampoo!*

I looked around in despondency and noticed the pictures hanging on the wall. As if to reinforce South African stereotypes, they were antique illustrations of, wait for it, 'The Races of the World'. Here was a drawing of black Africans: from the Ashanti to the Zulu, they were all there, annotated with a key for explanation. Another sketch depicted the 'American Races', North to South: from a Labrador Eskimo

to a Tierra del Fuego Indian. Opposite hung another – ‘Asian Races’: Yukagir, Ostiak, Mongolian Kalmuk...

I stopped. Why this overwhelming need to classify people? OK, point taken, these antique prints were designed when phrenology was the rage and the dimensions of your skull were the blueprint of your innermost characteristics; they were drafted during a bygone period when science was used to reinforce prejudices about the superiority of the European; but what were they doing here and now? Decorations like these seemed to provide the confirmation a tourist would expect from South Africa: here’s a country fostering an unhealthy obsession with race and its classification.

I didn’t know Martin well enough to bring up the subject. Plus I was having a bad hair day, and I had to walk to the Brooklyn Plaza Shopping Centre for a bottle of shampoo.

Pretoria is where shopping malls go to die. There is a sort of centre that harbours businesses where one can stroll during the day but, after work hours, it is deserted. The white residents retire to their villas behind barbed wire and the black ones disappear out of sight in the remote townships or sleep roughly in the darkened corners. Brooklyn is typical of this shopping-mall-and-cellphone white culture of South Africa which is suburbia in a big, American, Spielberg kind of way. No one walks: one drives a car from the fenced-off 24-hour-armed-response house to the mall with its police-patrolled, restricted-access pedestrian areas in order to shop, eat or simply post a letter and returns home, cellphone attached to belt, shopping in the boot, infrared garage door opener in the hand. I could easily see how tourists are recognised and mugged: they are the white ones who walk. If they also have a small daypack they have been positively identified. What can there be in that daypack? It sure ain’t their lunch.

Shampooed and cleansed, I opened my door – no key – and waltzed down the grand spiral staircase. Martin and Elben,

his male housekeeper, were waiting patiently in the living room; they had turned the music off so as not to disturb me. Martin offered me a beer. As an introduction to the Afrikaners, he was the perfect specimen: he had the manners of Cary Grant combined with the charm of Bryan Ferry.

‘Amazing place,’ I said.

‘You like it?’ Martin asked and his face lit up. ‘It’s a famous house. It was designed by a famous architect in the nineteen-thirties. His name was Gerhard Moerdijk.’

I jumped. ‘As in the architect of the Voortrekker monument?’

‘The very same.’

‘Who did the house belong to, then?’

Martin took a deep breath. ‘It belonged to Jimmy Kruger.’

‘Who?’

‘Jimmy Kruger. He was the South African Minister of Police when Steve Biko died.’

Oh, *that* Jimmy Kruger. I winced. Martin smiled. ‘I’ve had the place exorcised properly, don’t you worry. Ritual upon ritual.’

‘How much did the house cost, if I may ask?’

‘About 1,400,000 rand,’ Martin said.

My mouth dropped. At ten rand to the pound, this was £140,000.

‘My poxy London flat cost more than that,’ I retorted.

Elben, Martin and I looked at each other in mutual incredulity.

‘I suppose to you this is cheap with the rand so low,’ Martin said sheepishly.

He was right: I’d had a peek in the shopping mall – I could have a restaurant meal for the price of a takeaway kebab in Hackney. The falling rand must have had a more devastating effect on the insularity of South Africans than sanctions ever did.

‘You’re the second-ever guest in my B&B,’ Martin said. ‘I call it the Blue Angel.’

‘As in the Dietrich movie?’ I asked.

‘Exactly.’ Martin clapped his hands and turned to Elben triumphantly. ‘I told you they would get the reference.’ He looked back at me. ‘Elben said it was too obscure.’

Elben gracefully acknowledged his mistake. I examined him closely for the first time: blond and healthy, he was a carbon copy of Jaco from Ulysses Tours – his prominent arm tattoos camouflaging an easy-going temperament.

A movement outside caught my attention. I expected a black gardener, but not – what? – one, two... *eight* construction workers packing up to go home.

Martin followed my gaze. ‘I’m building an extension,’ he said. ‘It will be an antique shop. Do you know anywhere in the world for buying cheap antiques?’

‘Not in Europe,’ I said. ‘The way the rand is going... try Buenos Aires. These grand Argentinian families are selling the family silver because they found themselves living in a Third World country.’

‘Like South Africa,’ the duo said in unison and with not a little glee.

Aha, political discourse already! I was ready to take off but pangs of hunger made me realise I had eaten nothing since my in-flight meal. Plus it was getting dark outside.

‘I’m starving,’ I said to Martin. ‘I’m off. Do I get a key to my room?’

He was taken aback. ‘A key? But there will be someone here all the time.’

I was taken aback in return. ‘Yes, but other residents...’

‘There are no other residents,’ he said and then added innocently: ‘Do you think I should provide keys for my guests?’

‘I suppose, it’s customary,’ I said apologetically.

‘I see.’ I could sense he was lost for words. ‘I’ll call a locksmith tomorrow.’ And after a pause: ‘Where are you going to eat?’

‘I thought I’d walk to Hatfield Square.’

‘*Walk?*’ exclaimed Martin. ‘*Walk?* It’s night, and this is South Africa. I’ll take you there in my car.’