



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:18:00

Kalahari Dream

By Len Davis

Last night I dreamt I was back in the Kalahari. Same old dream, same dread at what was to come. Same encampment, under the rocky outcrop, with the stunted trees and straggling thorn bushes lining the old donga at its base. Same dry, dusty air and same old geckos darting in and out of the rocks. Here and there clumps of bush grass. A grey tarpaulin spread from the back of the Land Rover, the same campfire, and, of course, the baboons. The cliff was a regular night-time perch for a troop of them. If you don't bother them, they're harmless enough, but bloody noisy.

Baboons are sociable animals, but quarrels and fights within the troop are endemic. Every now and then one or two of the younger males, greatly daring, would approach to within 30 yards, screaming and posturing - a threat display. Sometimes they would even rush into the camp when your back was turned and make off with some small item. But a loud noise or a torch light would be enough to scare them off. It didn't do to throw rocks though – the whole troop would happily reply in kind.

An hour after dusk they settled, and it was time for me to leave. I waved goodbye to the girl, checked my kit, and drove west.

The dream rolled on, remorselessly. The Kalahari Desert. When you think desert you think of rolling sand-dunes, no vegetation, and a pitiless sun in a cobalt sky. That's not the Kalahari; but the Namib, over the border in South-West Africa is exactly like that. Everyone's heard of the Skeleton coast, where the Namib meets the south Atlantic; the dunes there run more-or-less parallel to the shore and can be eight or nine hundred feet high, making travelling east virtually impossible. A couple of hundred kilometres inland there are mountains leading up to the central plateau, and the landscape changes to a flat plain with the odd, usually dry, water course. That's where I was heading.

Camel thorn, Ana trees and other low scrub start to appear. Sand and gravel are everywhere, covering your clothes, choking your nose and throat; a herd of eland or a truck can be seen for miles by the dust they kick up. To avoid detection wary travellers walk, at night.

That's how Samuel came, having collected the diamonds from his contact in Omaruru, just outside Windhoek. These days Omaruru is all tourist lodges, rock painting sites and ice cream sellers, but back then there was just the odd cattle ranch and the desert. And the RSA police of course. An army style force, with machine guns mounted on Land Rovers, dogs, and even a helicopter.

Samuel was only really worried by the dogs – the ever-present dust storms jammed the guns and clogged the filters on the 'copter's air intake. For the dogs he had gemsbok meat, liberally sprinkled with rat poison. 'A few close shaves' he said, 'but nothing serious. Easy in, easy out.' He always said that, but we both knew otherwise. He was a typical Herero – tall, lithe, and coal-black. His delicate,

chiselled features, were stretched taut across high cheekbones, showing the tension he denied.

Our rendezvous was near the South-West Africa/Bechuanaland border. It's clearly marked on the map, but there is no sign of it on the ground. It runs straight as a die for hundreds of kilometres along longitude 21 degrees east, regardless of geographic features. Not that there are any features to speak of – just scrub.

It was one of those African boundaries agreed at a European conference in the 19th century. The British and Germans tossed for Namaqualand, a vast area half the size of Europe, and the Germans won. They promptly renamed it South-West Africa just in case anyone thought it belonged to the Namaquas. There was a small Dutch settlement at Walvis Bay, but no Europeans had set foot in the interior. Back then no-one could cross the dune sea from the Skeleton Coast – the 'Gates of Hell' as the Portuguese sailors called it. Hence the arbitrary line on the map.

We met at the foot of a nameless kopje; rising some 300 ft above the plateau, it was the highest point for miles. It was always cash; Samuel paid his miner contact in Rand, and I paid him about three times more in Dollars. I carefully put the stones in the hidden pouch in my donkey jacket and gave him a swig of whiskey from the bottle in the cab. He made a perfunctory attempt to persuade me to do another run, but he knew it was hopeless.

'This is the last, then I'm home free' I told him.

He didn't stay to argue; he headed south aiming for a Herero cattle post on the far side of the Windhoek road. He had relatives there – hell, all the remaining Hereros were his relatives. I scrambled back the mile or so to the Land Rover and headed back.

An ocean swell murmurs in the back of my dream, insistent, ominous.

At night the Kalahari is eerie; if you've been brought up in a city, as I had, the empty terrain, with no trace of human activity, seems alien. You could just as well be on Mars. I had to be careful to avoid rocks and gullies, but otherwise I had plenty of time to think. I thought about my Herero friend; he was named after their leader in the one-sided struggle against the Germans, back in 1905.

Samuel Ma Herero's people arrived from the north a hundred years ago and were in sporadic punch-ups with the Namaquas until Europeans intervened. They were tough fighters and did not take kindly to the German Governor's enlightened native policy, which involved commandeering all the decent land and forcibly enslaving the locals. When they objected, the powers-that-be decided they'd been too soft, replaced the Governor and brought in 14,000 heavily armed German troops. There was a new, 'firm but fair' policy for all blacks who objected to enslavement - 'leave the country or be shot'.

The Hereros retreated to the western Kalahari, where I was now, and continued to object, until the Germans stationed troops at every well, water hole and stream. The objections only stopped when four out of every five Hereros (some 65,000 men women and children) and all their leaders were dead. As abundant labour was needed to dig out the recently discovered diamonds, the remnants of the tribe were 'volunteered' for the mines. Over half the Namaquas perished as well, and that was the end of the 'native problem' for almost sixty years.

During World War 1 the South Africans ejected the German government and lost no time in requisitioning the mines. They saw no reason to change the 'firm but fair' treatment of the locals. The Boers got on well with the German settlers, they saw things in much the same way, and so despite numerous complaints by international bodies over the years, that's how things stayed.

But in 1966 the surviving remnants of the Hereros formed the South West Africa People's Organisation and started objecting again. SWAPO's 'Liberation Army', under their leader Sam Nujoma – another Samuel – were now based largely over the northern border in Angola, and sizable contingents of the South African Defence Force were devoted to a continuance of the 'firm but fair' policy.

It was hardly surprising that now, in the seventies, my Samuel was keen to subvert his government in any way he could. I'd met him a couple of years ago, in a shebeen outside Windhoek. I'd gone there to get away from the drunken Afrikaners in town; he was there to celebrate his first ever paid employment – as a refuse collector for the municipality. Man, could he drink beer. He slept it off in the back of my truck, and we'd been pals ever since. He was full of tips as to where to find game, or water, and then suddenly, diamonds. Over the past eighteen months I'd met him three times, on each occasion pocketing a handful of rough stones, all of which were now safely stored at my place in Mahalapye.

I drove slightly south of east, through featureless scrub, with beds of dried up streams and low kopjes. heading for the encampment outside Ghanzi, in the Kalahari Game Reserve, where the girl was waiting. Jill, the admiral's daughter, slim and dark, with the ready lips and Sloan accent. Trim figure and oval face. Oval face,

full lips, and..., and with, with – no, not now, sweat breaking out, the face, no, no, not yet, not ever...

Tiny breakers, little white horses, part of a broad swell moving steadily across the ocean. The horror still hidden, but there, familiar, like an old toothache.

Concentrate, now is not the time. You know this dream by heart. Think, the driving, the starlight, dashboard compass; not that it was needed, with Polaris shining over my right shoulder. I felt like an intruder, crossing that high, empty plateau in the cold dead of night. Humanity did not belong here. The vast globe of the heavens, packed with stars, seemed close enough to touch. No clouds, no movement, no habitation. Nocturnal animals see you coming and avoid you. Moonlight casts faint, still, shadows; you feel alone on the roof of the world.

I stopped for a while to listen for any pursuit, but there was no sound, just a faint breeze and the cold piercing my desert boots. The heater in the land rover had packed up ages ago; I shivered, pulled my donkey jacket and the diamonds closer, and drove on.

I thought about Samuel's contact in Omaruru. He was strictly low visibility, but with some tough companions in the background; Samuel had hinted at SWAPO connections. If his contact was hard, the diamonds were even harder - they were of high quality and all gem-grade. I was pretty sure where they came from.

In 1908 a Herr Luderitz had discovered alluvial diamonds just lying on the beach at the Southern end of the Skeleton Coast, and a large mining town, Kolmanskop, quickly grew up there. Later a much

richer source was found down on the South African border by the mouth of the Orange River, so all the mining shifted south and Kolmanskop was now a ghost town. There were still tales of ship-wrecked sailors or desperate prospectors dying of thirst on the Skeleton coast with pockets full of alluvial diamonds, and it seemed likely that Samuel's stones had originated there as well. Oranjemund was just too well guarded, and SWAPO seldom operated that close to South Africa. It would not do to get caught, especially on the South-West side of the non-existent border.

Two hours of careful driving across the savannah brought the encampment into view. I approached carefully but everything looked OK. The girl came to meet me, a question on her lips (those lips! terror bubbling, no, no, not yet). When I told her all was well she gave a great whoop, setting off a minor burst of grunts and screams from the baboons.

'How many stones?' she wanted to know.

'Enough, I think; together with the ones from the other trips, we should be fine. Not a fortune, but OK'. Cutting short her relief and excitement I told her we were not clear of the woods yet. 'Leave the chickens uncounted, girl.' I growled, 'it doesn't do to celebrate too soon.' Boy, was I right?

'Oh, and we have visitors' she said, and I immediately stiffened, rapidly scanning the area for trouble. 'No, no' she smiled, 'just a happy event'. She waved towards the campfire, and there, sitting propped against a rock was a young female bushman, with a tiny new-born baby at her breast. She looked wary but exhausted. She was probably no more than 20, but she already had the typical

wrinkled bushman face, making her look much older. And peeping over her shoulder, from deep shadow, a really young face, serious and wide-eyed – a girl of 6 or 7.

Jill said 'I felt so useless, but the little girl seemed to know what to do, and the baby arrived so easily. Ten minutes of agony, and it was all over. All I could do was give them water, and an old towel for the baby. When they saw it was a boy, they both grinned from ear to ear.'

'How did they get here' I asked, although I could guess. About midnight Jill had seen a large, wounded Kudu racing past, and then, twenty minutes later, it was followed by an entire family of Bushmen, running steadily. Jill said there were about a dozen of them. When they saw her, they slowed, and this woman sank to her knees in labour. After some brief hand signals the group continued their hunt, leaving the woman to give birth, assisted by the girl. Jill was amazed, but I told her this was quite usual. Bushmen will often follow their wounded prey for two or three days, and the whole tribe has to go along. After giving birth, the mother will rest up for an hour or two before running after the rest, carrying the newborn.

'But that's inhuman' Jill protested, 'why didn't she stay at home?'

'Listen,' I said, 'they are nomads; they don't have a 'home'. And these stone age survivors are tough. They don't have the advantage of 10,000 years of civilisation. The real question is, what are we to do with them? I don't want to hang around this close to South-West for too long. The RSA police have been known to ignore borders.'

No way could I manage bushman talk, with all those back-of-the-throat clicks, and in any case every tribe or group's speech is subtly different. Instead I tried some Setswana. 'Dumela Ma, uit sohele?'

'Eehe Ra' she replied, 'uit sohele sintle'.

Well, that was a relief; we could communicate, and she said she was OK. I'm not the world's greatest linguist but eventually I established that her name was N(click)'Seela and she planned to rejoin her family just past the Ghanzi trading post. And she wanted to know my name. 'Jack' I told her. 'Xack, Xhack' she clicked, and the little girl laughed aloud.

'It seems the baby will be named for you' smiled Jill. Suddenly everyone was all gooey-eyed, and full of that milk-of-human-kindness guff. The baby was suckling, the young bush-girl was skipping, and Jill was kissing me. 'Jack, let me take them into Ghanzi – it's almost dawn and it's only a couple hours round trip. You could do with some sleep before we head back to Mahalapye.'

I wanted to press on, but she was right. I could do with a rest before attempting the drive; the surface was graded, but there were ruts and potholes everywhere. There wasn't room for all of us in the cab and the back was packed. A 45-gallon water drum, tyre chains, spades, four big petrol cans, my hunting gear, our clothes and some rations. Once the camping gear and sleeping bags were added it would be chock-a-block.

'OK then, you may as well fill up with petrol and water at the same time. And listen, tell everyone we're off, but going back to the Okavango. A bit of misdirection will do no harm. But don't hang about, I want us to be on the Salisbury train when it leaves Mahalapye early tomorrow.'

The wave is towering over me, picking up speed and emotion; the awful consequences seemingly inevitable. An unstoppable avalanche of horror.

In no time they were off, the little bush-girl waving shyly. Jill was right about the dawn. There was a thin gold edge to the night for two or three minutes, then the sun was up. Talk about coming up 'like thunder'; if you haven't experienced it for yourself you can't believe how rapid it is. Within five minutes it was hot – so off came the donkey jacket, and I settled back on the sleeping bag. I couldn't sleep, my brain was churning, and a nearby family of meercats were calling softly to one-another. The baboon troop departed, noisy as ever, the meercats settled down and I allowed myself to start to believe.

From Salisbury it was only a 12-hour flight to Paris, and then a short train ride to Amsterdam. The stones were probably worth around a hundred thousand dollars, but for 'no questions asked' I'd get fifty. Not a fortune, but definitely useful. My big game safari business made money some of the time, but nowadays people shot film, not bullets and wanted home comforts whilst they aimed their telephotos.

That's how I met Jill, on safari with the admiral and her mother. We fell for each other in a big way, we couldn't keep our hands off each other and when the safari ended, I was desperate to keep her. She loved the desert, the big game, the swamps of the Okavango, the insects - the whole deal. She stayed for another month, it stretched into three, but we couldn't go on indefinitely. Her old man was OK, but mummy couldn't see her daughter living off the back of a Land Rover in the Kalahari wastes. To be honest, neither could I.

When Jill suggested we start a safari lodge somewhere in the Okavango, with all mod-cons, I knew it was meant. With her upper-class contacts back in Blighty, and my local expertise, we could really make a go of it. All we needed was the cash, the lolly, mazusa, the wherewithal. The admiral offered to stake me, but I'm my own man. So the diamonds were the solution, my solution. We'd still need help, but it would be ours, not a home-from-home for her parents. It should be downhill all the way from here, I told myself. And it damn nearly was.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew the Land Rover was trundling back towards me, Jill playing the wedding march on the horn. Her excitement was infectious; shouting with joy I capered about the site, singing 'We're in the money' grinning fit to bust. Jill started swinging the truck from side to side circling the campsite. 'What's the best hotel in Amsterdam?' she shouted, 'I want champagne, caviar and you.' Believe me, I wasn't about to argue.

Then it happened. She swerved to avoid the dried-out gully and the front tyre struck a buried rock. The truck juddered, the backend slewing into the donga, and stalled. Shaken, she levered open the door and jumped down into the donga. The front wheel tyre was clearly a goner. A rear wheel hung over the gully, with precious little grip. Land Rovers are front-wheel –drive, and ours was going nowhere without a new wheel.

Just before a tsunami strikes land the waters pull back from the shore, a strange and deathly stillness descends, and looking back, everything takes on a heightened intensity.

At first it didn't seem too bad. Punctures are not uncommon, so we always carried two spare wheels; changing a wheel was usually a piece of cake. But the truck was leaning over at about 30 degrees, in danger of tipping further into the gully. We couldn't push it up onto the flat, even after unloading most of the gear. The gravel was just too loose – the more we pushed, the deeper the damaged wheel sank. We couldn't go backwards – any further into the donga and we might never get it out again. And the big 45-gallon drum was now full of water – if you've ever tried to lift one, you know they weigh nearly half a ton. Even if we got it off, we'd never get it back. Not without help, something I was anxious to avoid.

In the end, we piled loose rocks into the gully under the good wheel and I wrestled the water drum over to the other side. I used the firmest rocks we could find as a floor for the jack, and gingerly cranked the front up. I daren't go too high in case the whole thing toppled over. At last we were able to wriggle the bent wheel off the axle and position the replacement. But it wasn't easy to get the wheel over the bolts. As fast as we cleared space under the axle, more sand fell in. Manoeuvring the wheel into position just made it worse. I didn't think we could raise the jack further. There was hardly any room to work – we couldn't both get beside the wheel at once. It was dry, dusty, and bloody hot.

After a short rest and a mouthful of water we tried another way. Jill lay on her back, in front of the truck guiding the wheel whilst I lowered it into position. We were almost there when I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye.

It was a pair of baboons, tugging at my donkey jacket where it lay ten feet away. As I looked up one of them tore it from the other's grasp and scampered off. 'The diamonds' I shouted and jumped up. My foot caught something as I went, and everything seemed to go into slow motion. A rock and some gravel were falling into the donga. I saw the jack going with them. I started to shout as the body of the 2-ton truck, with its heavy diesel engine, and the half-ton water drum, fell forward, sending the spare wheel flying. There was a sickening crunch, and an awful crack, like a walnut breaking, a crack, like a walnut, an awful crack.... A terrible screaming – it's me.

I'm helpless, thunder all around me, the tsunami strikes, a tidal avalanche of horror and terror, crashing down on me, obliterating my hopes, my dreams, my future.

That's when I woke up. That's when I always wake up. Screaming, as usual.

They say that the dreams will stop if I can go on to the end. But even awake and with professional help I can scarcely bear to go further. To see the grey matter on my boots, to see the front of the truck lying on the body, my vomit. Eventually I got the jack back in position but could not look at where the end of the axle had smashed into her face. Now I cannot see her face in my memory, only that smashed abomination.

Eventually, two days later, the Bushmen found us. I was cradling her remains, slipping in and out of delirium. Later the District Commissioner came down from Maun, and enlisted the help of the

RSA police, who naturally found the damnable diamonds. They let me go to her funeral; the admiral could not stand to be anywhere near me, and no-one spoke. After a few years they released me from my physical prison, but I'm still incarcerated in my head. Everything's changed – it's Botswana and Namibia now, but for me it will always be that fateful day. Drink helps.

©Len Davis 2020