# Travels with his Boet

**Book is loosely based on the travels of twins and their wives. Warning: not an extreme amount of exaggeration is present.**

**Title:** Travels with his Boet **Subtitle:** A Guide to Surviving Road Trips and Bruised Egos without sacrificing your marriage and sanity.

**Book Blurb:** Ever wondered what happens when you shove two siblings with two wives—one with infinite patience (that’s me, by the way) and the others with the strategic brilliance of a headless chickens—into elderly and questionable cars and send them off into the great unknown? Welcome to “My Travels With His Boet.”

Definitely this is not a travel guide. Oh no, this is a cautionary tale filled with unintentional detours, arguments over maps only I know how to read, and the eternal struggle to find a petrol station which sells cheap diesel *before* the tank hits empty.

It explores why women live longer than men, and how to survive marrying twin brothers. This book is sure to be a bestseller—or at least, a warning for others thinking of embarking on similar sibling road trips or getting married.

The book will cover pertinent information in two sections- The tumultuous trips and Iron Chef Chronicles. AI has been consulted and cuts out the offensive language.

**Section1 The tumultuous trips with the Travelling Quartet**

The tumultuous trips with the Travelling Quartet will cover the following investigations:

**: “Why Did We Think This Was a Good Idea?”** A deep dive into the decision-making process (or lack thereof) behind many ill-fated expeditions. Spoiler alert: It normally involved boet convincing his brain-dead twin with beer, wine and me producing expired maps.(I know I am cheap!)

**“Engine fixing and should that red light be blinking**?” A commentary on the true test of brotherly mechanical skills, nightmares, and stranding. Spoiler alert: They are better with cars than wives.

**“Camp Pitching and Other Brotherly Bonding Disasters”** Camping is a test of survival skills, patience, and the tensile strength of both the sibling and marriage relationship.

**“Lost in the Middle of Nowhere, Again”** A tribute to the many times one of the twins said, "Trust me, I know a shortcut." Spoiler alert: most the time they did not.

**“When Things Go South (Literally)”H**arrowing accounts of how our attempts at navigation often results in us heading towards the opposite pole.

**“Boet-isms: Pearls of Wisdom from the Unqualified”** A collection of the twins most notable quotes, including gems like “What could possibly go wrong?” and “I totally fixed the engine—no mechanic needed.”

**“Love and loss”** how tosurvive misplaced sunglasses, keys, water bottles andother miscellaneous items, again and again and again!

**Section 2 Iron Chef Chronicles:**

**The “Iron Chef Chronicles” is** the gripping sagas of two self-proclaimed food enthusiasts who have made cooking an Olympic sport where cooking takes on the intensity of gladiatorial combat. Comes complete with drama, flair, and the occasional food-based casualty.

**Who is best:** Two self-proclaimed culinary virtuosos reign supreme, turning every meal prep into an Olympic showdown.

**Virtuosos of flame and frying pan:** Unusual ways in which uncommon implements are used to create food.

**Not so Green:** Forget greens—they’re banned like performance-enhancing drugs., if not actively avoided

**The moral vegetarian warrior:**  On the other side, there’s me: a vegetarian armed with moral convictions, questionable veg burgers, and a knack for dodging “mystery biltong” in salads.

**The Reign of the Salad Queen:** Armed with a cutting board and a repertoire of crisp vegetables, she rules her kitchen

Table of Contents

[Travels with his Boet 1](#_Toc196647682)

[Introduction 4](#_Toc196647683)

[Section 1 The tumultuous trips with the Travelling Quartet 5](#_Toc196647684)

[Slithering Serpents A Retirement home introduction 6](#_Toc196647685)

[Scorpions Beliefs and Elephants 9](#_Toc196647686)

[Red lights blinking 15](#_Toc196647687)

[Exercise, Escapes and disappointment 19](#_Toc196647688)

[Plank Sinatra 24](#_Toc196647689)

[Whose idea was this anyway?” 27](#_Toc196647690)

[Nature’s Car Wash 35](#_Toc196647691)

[Welcome to my overpriced wilderness! 38](#_Toc196647692)

[The Last Leg of Doom and Potholes 41](#_Toc196647693)

[Petal Powered Chaos 43](#_Toc196647694)

[Nieuwoudtville Nights: Power Outages, Baked Beans, and Camping Chaos 53](#_Toc196647695)

[Nope No Problems Here 58](#_Toc196647696)

[Gazebo Woes and Gravel Road Bouncing 63](#_Toc196647697)

["The Hyena Sleeps Tonight, But We’re Wide Awake" 67](#_Toc196647698)

[The Canine Disappearance Act" 71](#_Toc196647699)

[Hyena Hysteria 74](#_Toc196647700)

[Hook Line and stinker 78](#_Toc196647701)

[Section 2 Iron Chef Chronicles: 85](#_Toc196647702)

[The Culinary Maverick 86](#_Toc196647703)

[Flame-Kissed Breakfast: The Frittata That Survived 89](#_Toc196647704)

[Firth of Frugal Flames 91](#_Toc196647705)

[Camper Cuisine 94](#_Toc196647706)

[Great Spreadable Debate of the Century 97](#_Toc196647707)

[Campfire Breakfast Chronicles 101](#_Toc196647708)

# Introduction

Welcome to a tale of sibling chaos and marital misadventures, where two twin brothers—as different as rugby and interpretive dance—find themselves married to two sisters-in-law who are, quite frankly, walking proof that opposites do not always attract.

Travelling with twins who seem to operate on the same wavelength of chaos and poor decision-making is already a dicey proposition but throw in their wives—two women united solely by their questionable taste in husbands—and you've got yourself the kind of drama that makes you wish for subtitles and a referee. The twins, blissfully oblivious, spend the journey buried in their nostalgia-filled "greatest hits" conversations, as though anyone else cares to relive the time one of them won an argument with a toaster. Meanwhile, their wives, locked in a silent cold war, glare at each other with such frosty hostility that the air conditioning becomes entirely redundant—save your electricity, folks, the passive aggression is chilling enough.

On one side, we have the first brother: a self-declared handyman whose idea of “fixing things” usually involves welding, duct tape and a prayer. He’s married to Sister-in-Law #1,me- a serious academic author and a woman so meticulously organized that I color-coded my sock drawer and write “spontaneous fun” into my planner six months in advance. Add to that a tiny touch of health freak with studies in ethno-botany and ethno psychology as a hobby. Finally add a compete loathing of cigarette smoking. Together, we’re a ticking time bomb of missed communication and passive-aggressive WhatsApp’s.

Then there’s the second brother—a man-child with an unhealthy obsession with adventure and a diet of chips and biltong. Enter Sister-in-Law #2—a chain-smoking, crystal-toting whirlwind of spiritual enlightenment and selective logic. In her world, the universe conspires to bless her every whim, if she thinks positively. Her positive thinking is done through a cloud of cigarette smoke thick enough to blot out the sun. She’s convinced her word search puzzles are basically Mensa IQ tests in disguise. Forget Sudoku—that’s for amateurs. Sister-in-Law #2 is mapping out the next Nobel Prize for Literature one circle around “CAT” at a time.

Of course, the twins are far too busy competing in the “Who Can Burn The Braai Meat Faster and Still Call It Edible” Olympics to notice the simmering resentment bubbling behind them. But the wives, ever resourceful, find rare moments of unity through the time-honoured tradition of husband-bashing—sharing tales of male incompetence like seasoned battle veterans swapping war stories. As the holidays dragson, it becomes abundantly clear that this isn't so much a vacation as it is a survival exercise in keeping the peace—or, at the very least, avoiding a headline about "Braai-Fueled Family Meltdown Goes Viral." Exciting reality TV in the making.

It’s a hilarious disaster waiting to happen. Brace yourself for a journey through sibling rivalry, in-law antics, and enough sarcasm to fill a swimming pool. Because when twins and two very different strong women collide, normalcy doesn’t just go out the window—it leaps out and sets itself on fire. Enjoy the ride!

# Section 1 The tumultuous trips with the Travelling Quartet

## Slithering Serpents A Retirement home introduction

When Boet moved to the retirement cottage in Plett, we felt we had to visit in the interests of support and curiosity. We arrived after a 1300 Km drive that was spectacularly drama free until the ABS warning light started blinking its dire message as we pulled out of Beaufort West 320 Kms away from our destination of Plettenberg bay.

For those still piloting the trusty Model T Ford of modern motoring—brace yourselves. The ABS warning light, that tiny beacon of vehicular drama, is less a helpful hint and more a cosmic nudge that screams, “Surprise!” And when does it illuminate? Never while you’re sipping tea in the garage, of course. No, it chooses the peak of your noble quest—be it ferrying teenagers with headphone-induced selective hearing or travelling to distant relatives. Timing is everything, and apparently, the vehicular universe moonlights as a stand-up comedian.

Hubby’s diagnosis of the situation is like is normal textbook optimism. “Nothing is wrong!” he declares, as if he’s taming the blinking light through sheer force of will. And the brake-stomping test? Ingenious! Because if brakes respond normally when unnecessarily pounded into submission, the car must be perfectly healthy, right? As he glances at me, he sees my expression.” Boet and I will sort it out! What route should we take to get there?”

Now many years and little trust in my beloved’s casual utterances before experiences of vehicular doom prompted me in the choice to avoid the fastest route- a dirt road. The red light feels like a cautious rebellion against Murphy’s Law and why tempt fate when the odds of landing in a pothole shaped like the Grand Canyon are high enough already? A drama-free trip was merely the appetizer; the ABS light was clearly the main course. Boet is now informed of the impending disaster and agrees with Hubby’s choice- onward and beyond.

So, with red light blinking we limp up to Boet’s palace of the aged on the tar road at the oh-so-specific hour of 2:30 pm. Turns out, Boet isn’t channeling his inner medieval knight to guard the gate with a lance like remote, and his phone skills are positively out of a hamlet play: “To answer, or not to answer?"

Three attempts later that was clearly the question. After a lifetime (or was it just five minutes?) of ringing, he picks up, sounding like he’d either just seen the face of doom or accidentally deleted his favorite WhatsApp group.

“I feel a disturbance in the force,” I whisper to Hubby, who’s clearly too dazzled by the complex layers of Boet’s cryptic charm to notice the below zero chill in the air. Parking the flashing light and its accompanying vehicle under a convenient tree we go trundling toward the cottage of this elusive figure, only to find that hospitality is apparently taking a personal day. “Hello?” we chirp, standing around like unsellable antique furniture. Not a soul. Not even a stray cat to give us the side-eye.

Then, drama! A wild eyed Boet appears, stumbling out like he’s auditioning for Survivor: Backyard Edition. “Sorry!” he gasps, hair all askew, looking one missed nap away from total collapse. “There was a snake!” A snake! Naturally. Because, when you’re a host in a retirement home with unmatched charisma, one must always engage in gladiatorial combat with reptiles to spice up an otherwise mundane afternoon with the old ducks.

I feel a need to prove my origins as a past daughter of farming folk (on a game farm no less). With the stealth of a seasoned bushwhacker, I grab a brush innocently lurking in the garage we have entered-a mighty weapon of questionable effectiveness—and prepare to face the writhing peril. As we creep toward the stoep, sliding passed the parked car and the debris of Boet’s last beer brewing attempt, every rustle of the wind sounds like a snake rehearsing its sinister entrance. Hubby follows cautiously, at a distance behind me, probably questioning his accommodation choices but too polite to verbalize them.

It is a very short walk from the garage to the patio. The patio is an area in South Africa we politely call the stoep because we’re classy with our words in this part of the woods. We reach this noble terrace of the stoep and find there standing shaken, is the main participant in our afternoon soap opera. Di, the unintentional heroine of this drama, wielding an unlit cigarette like it’s a prop stolen from the set of a vintage detective film.. Cigarette clutched in the hand she gestures with it ominously toward the scene of the crime, her voice dripping with doom. “It went in there,” she intones, her finger trembling as if she’s summoning the spirit of Beelzebub himself.

We follow her gaze, and lo and behold it points to the flower bed. Ah, yes. Two meters from the stoep, it sits like a poorly curated jungle exhibit. A glorious overgrown labyrinth that practically screams, “Snakes welcome, humans discouraged!” If I were a snake, I’d book this spot immediately on Snake air BnB, leaving a glowing five-star review: “Exceptional hiding spots, plenty of foliage. Would recommend!”

I clutch my brush tighter, ready to channel my inner Indiana Jones—but let’s be honest, even Indy would’ve taken one look at that snake palace and opted for a tactical retreat.

Equipped with nothing but uncharitable thoughts and the doubtful wisdom of an amateur herpetologist, I advance cautiously toward the snake’s last known lair. Di’s words hang in the air: *“It was black.”* Cue the dramatic music. Of course, my mind leaps straight to the Mamba—a snake that practically comes with its own horror franchise. The way she describes it, it's practically auditioning for the role of "terrifying antagonist" in your real-life thriller. A meter long? Might as well be fifty with the amount of dread it inspires!

I eye the stoep, door wide open like a grand invitation to all scaly creatures. *“Snakes welcome,”* I grumble, mentally drafting strongly worded stoep signage regulations and creating a internal message to myself which involved keeping our bedroom door tightly closed at all times. With the graceful yet hesitant strides I stop short about a meter away from the apparent serpent paradise.

I stare, see nothing, so in an authoritative declaration I declare “I think it has gone”, trying to impose so much conviction in my voice that David Attenborough and National Geographic would have hired me on the spot*.* “But keep the bed off-limits for now, just in case the snake has decided to embrace its inner Tarzan and make a new home up the tree.”

Di falls back to her couch on the stoep and lights the waving cancer stick. “ I hate this place she says with conviction, “all these snakes and things, it’s like living in a jungle!” I bite back the burning question of why she chose to inhabit the serpent capital of South Africa, clutching onto the fragile lifeboat of familial harmony—because, as any seasoned relative knows, peace in the family is about swallowing certain words harder than you swallow the mystery wine your host serves.

“ Do you want a drink?” she offers waving at Boet. “I think I need one!”

Boet her white-faced protector, strides into the conversation, “A coke Di?” he asks.

“ Sugar free coke!” Di corrects him with the sheer precision of a Diet Coke aficionado, her correction carrying the weight of forty years’ worth of marital misunderstandings, many of which have been sugar free. You can practically feel her despair as she contemplates how, after all this time, her husband still hasn’t grasped the magnitude of her unwavering dedication to this particular type of sacred fizzy chemical combination.

Boet, is clearly a graduate of the " Surviving Spousal Dynamics 101" course, as handles the situation like a pro. Without a single twitch of dismay, he nods, then pivots seamlessly to hubby, offering a beer with the practiced ease of a man who knows exactly how to handle his brother-in-law. Then comes the real challenge: me. His expression, a masterpiece of resigned acceptance, hints at the many battles fought—and lost—against the labyrinthine complexity of my drink preferences. To Boet, I am not a guest; I am the drink and food order wild card, the sister-in-law who keeps him on his toes or who makes life extremely difficult for him.

I let the suspense last as Boet awaits my answer, watching him brace himself for a request that could range from lukewarm herbal tea to a mixture with a seven-step preparation process.

“Do you have a glass of red?

My simple request for a glass of red, triggers Boet's moment of existential despair as he realises I will compete for his own thirst quencher that evening. But, ever the consummate host, he dons the guise of a reluctant sommelier, with the practiced air of someone who's faced far more challenging requests in his lifetime.

Off he goes to retrieve the rarest "vintage" red—carefully chosen from a box that exudes the fine aesthetic of cardboard chic. The pour is deliberate, each millilitre measured with the seriousness of a life-changing ritual. The glass emerges filled and presented, a masterpiece of hospitality, albeit with undertones of "please don’t ask for another one."

And thus, as my triumphant alcohol is delivered, accompanied by Boet’s quiet heroism and generosity, then we sit and stare at the offending flower bed, alert for any slithering attempt to attend our party.

## Scorpions Beliefs and Elephants

It became glaringly obvious the “getting to know it” phase of the wrinkle ranch had to take place as the offending light on our chariot took precedence on our plans to exit the buildings and go camping. The boys were keen to look at the offending vehicle, but decided the excitement would wait until the next day.

if our grand entrance to the serene village was wrapped in slithering drama, supper wasn’t about to let us off the hook. Picture it: we were poised for culinary delight—Di with her carb-free dinner, because carbs at night are apparently as bad for you as unpaid parking fines. We were preparing to we attack our salads, when the stage curtain rose on Act Two of Chaos.

*Knock-knock on the front glass doors.* And who enters, you ask? A man. A stranger. Not creeping in cautiously, no—he waltzed right in, to the tableau at the table with nary an invite as if auditioning for the role of “Most Uninvited Dinner Guest.”

“Ello” he announced with a casual glance at our plates of food, like he was inspecting buffet options.

“Can I help you?” Boet’s polite response replied mid-chew. His unrattled response seemed to indicate mid-meal interruptions were part of the general joy of the living arrangements of the aged.

“Are you going to Knysna tomorrow?” I sat mid fork to my mouth with my wilting lettuce-the suspense was killing me.

“I can do so” Boet, as always was the epitome of brevity.

“Can you take Graham?” And just like that, the cryptic exchange was concluded with a nod. The stranger vanished as dramatically as he’d entered.

“Does this often happen?” my fork eventually lay itself down as I looked at my hosts in open mouthed amazement. My hosts nodded their expressions a resigned acceptance of life in the land of perpetual interruption.

“Oh yes,” Boet replied with a knowing nod, as though random strangers barging in during dinner was a cherished community pastime—right up there with lawn bowling and lunch at precisely 1 p.m. “It’s part of the charm.” He looked up from his piece of meat. “Welcome to retirement village life.”

The next day Boet took the aforesaid Graham into the bustling town of Knysna and brought him back. The boys then decided to sit on Boet’s computer to read up about offending ABS lights on Isuzu Bakkies. Bored I sat with Di and silently started to melt in the heat.

Now at this palace of the aged there is a lovely pool. The temperature was decidedly warm and I love swimming. I am sure you can see where we are going here. Like me you thought- we should go for a swim. If only life was that easy!

As I mentioned to my gracious hostess smoking up a storm on the stoep, maybe we could enter said pool. Acceptably clothed of course in our bathing suits, I had a warning. As Di’s carefully drawn Eyebrows lifted into her hairline. I realized this was going to be an issue. It was! With a voice that indicated pestilence and doom, the statement that came was delivered with the gravitas of a town crier announcing impending plague. What she said was enough to make anyone hesitate and question the possible health risks of immersion in the blue water..

“The old ladies pee in it,” she declared, as if the pool were a bubbling cauldron of mischief.

The sun was relentless, and the heat had reached levels that could fry an egg on the stoep. Next door people were splashing in the clear blue water of the pool. It was unbearable and finally armed with the comforting thought that chlorine is the superhero of sanitation, I decided to brave the waters. A small dunk, I reasoned, couldn’t hurt. After all, isn’t life about taking risks—even if those risks involve sharing a pool with the village’s ammonia producers?

As I approached the pool, I could almost hear the chlorine whispering, “I’ve got this.” And with that surety, I plunged in, embracing the cool relief and hoping the chemical warriors were working overtime.

The pool, shimmering like an oasis in the midst of retirement village drama, turned out to be an absolute gem. Despite my sister-in-law’s dire warnings, the old ladies were charming storytellers, floating and chatting with me, the newcomer, as if they were auditioning me in a water ballet of wisdom.

Within minutes, I was surrounded by a squad of friendly grandmothers, eager to regale me with tales from decades past—illness, heartbreak, triumphs, and the occasional scandal. Loneliness for the elderly is an odd, bittersweet companion—a shadow that follows them around like an overly clingy acquaintance. Their stories poured out faster than the chlorine could disinfect, and I realized that this wasn’t just a pool; it was a wellspring of human history, laughter, and a touch of mischief. The pool was the epitome of the funny, heartbreaking irony of the aged: the rich tapestry of their lives brims with stories, but there’s often no audience to hear them.

In between this hive of conversational activity one lady stood out. A dazzling story of competence in her life as she forged her way through three bouts of cancer, sans husband to bring herself and her boys to maturity.

“It was only”, she added with deep passion I believe in the grace of God our father that I survived!” As I listened to her story it became apparent, she was gunning for souls, and Di was in her cross sight.

Let me give you a quick intro to Di.

Di is the undisputed queen of gardening. Without a doubt she is a private schooled virtuoso with a trowel who can coax life from even the most reluctant patch of dirt. Her plants are celebrities—they’re Instagram-worthy (if Instagram were a thing in the retirement village). As her sister-in -law, I marvel at her green thumb, whispering to the family that if she ever took up growing vegetables, we'd have world hunger solved in a week.

But Di, ever the enigma, also happens to be a staunch non-believer. The pure Atheist who believes we live, we die and that’s it. This belief makes the lone Buddha statue in her vicinity all the more entertaining. Nestled among the plants and brilliant white stones, the statue sits with serene indifference as if contemplating how it ended up here in the first place. Di views it less as a spiritual symbol and more as an exotic garden gnome. “It’s decorative,” she declares with a dismissive wave, as though its profound aura is lost on her amidst concerns about soil acidity and pruning techniques.

But to my ardent believer in the pool, the innocent Buddha statue was a direct emissary of Satan himself. Determined to save Di’s immortal soul from the clutches of this ceramic villain, this friend embarked on a mission of divine intervention. And what better way to connect than through shared vices? For she was ready to smoke and drink her way into Di’s heart—and, hopefully, into her salvation. It was a strategy as unconventional as it was hilarious, blending theology with a touch of rebellion. The Buddha, meanwhile, remained unbothered, quietly observing the chaos with its eternal calm. Classic Buddha. Classic Di. Classic retirement village drama.

I guess every retirement village has its characters, and Knysna lift Graham was certainly one of them. It was as I floated serenely in the pool, enjoying the cool chlorinated embrace that defied Di's dire warnings, that Graham entered the scene. His arrival was less of a casual introduction and more of a cinematic debut in the pool area.

Standing on the edge of the small blue pond, with a voice that could command the attention of a room (or at least a shallow end), Graham greeted me like an old friend he hadn’t yet met. Before I knew it, I was swept into an animated monologue about his life, his adventures, and, of course, his opinions on the best way to cook and take vitamins, because he was apparently a chef of some renown. He spoke with the kind of enthusiasm that made it impossible to not listen, and by the end of the encounter, I felt like I’d known him for years—even though I was still trying to figure out if he lived in the village or was simply a wandering raconteur who made pools his stage.

Brimming with excitement from my poolside tête-à-tête with Graham, I burst into the retirement cottage, ready to recount his masterclass in animated conversation. But Di, the reigning monarch of practical wisdom, was having none of it. Before I could even build up to the juicy bits of my story, she cut me off with a withering glance and declared, “Don’t encourage him, he’s a pest.”

A pest? Surely not! Graham, with his larger-than-life personality and unsolicited philosophies, had seemed the very definition of retirement village entertainment. But Di’s frosty reception painted him as a less charming raconteur and more uninvited over enthusiast. It was as if I had unknowingly wandered into a long-standing village feud—Di versus Graham, the clash of titans, with me stuck awkwardly in the middle. Life in the palace of aged intrigue was to keep things interesting!

The diversity of the residents was nothing short of fascinating. I had Di, the gardening queen and enforcer of spiritual decorum, Graham, the self-proclaimed raconteur, and an ardent believer, moonlighting as the village saviour. It was not yet noon, so I counted myself blessed.

That afternoon I was introduced to the drinking portion of the village. Well, that was refreshingly straightforward—no fancy mixology or pretentious garnishes. It was an honest affair: wine or sherry, pour, sip, repeat. The simplicity was almost poetic, a stark contrast to the whirlwind of colourful personalities and dramatic encounters. Watching Di give glassfuls of sparkling cheer on her cigarette hazed stoep was a remarkable study in human behaviour and potential lung cancer.

Graham eventually proved to be slightly unhinged mentally and had to be removed from the village within the next year, but the next morning as I strolled around the village, he was a charming if uninvited companion He happily walked with me, sharing a wealth of knowledge on the inhabitants and herbs. Graham seemed to have embraced his role as the unofficial historian and herbalist-in-residence, sharing tidbits about the inhabitants with an enthusiasm. I still have an image of him striding along, waxing poetic about herbs while looking like a renegade from a very peculiar retirement village fashion show, and it is a memory to cherish—and giggle about. According to Di, he died without a home, living on the beach, impoverished and lonely as his mind made him an enemy of his family and his pocket inadequate to the task of getting help. I shall however always remember his slightly large nappy clad figure running his hands lovingly down the plants as he explained what they meant in his culinary life.

Meanwhile Boet and Hubby had now parked the bakkie in the operating theatre section of the driveway. The wheels, quite literally, came off, and with it, any pretense of a calm, quick repair. Covered in oil, the two of them were more than happy to be starred in our gritty car-themed soap opera. They both were in their element, deep in significant chats and earnest discussions.

As the first day faded into the sleepy embrace of retirement village quiet, the saga of the bakkie remained unresolved. By the start of day two, the boys had homed in on the culprit: possibly the brakes.

Day two didn’t simply *start*—it announced itself with a scream so piercing it could’ve registered on the Richter scale. Di, our fearless heroine, had encountered a real-world scorpion. Not just *near* her bedroom—oh no—that eight-legged nightmare was *in* her sanctuary. The scorpion, for its part, seemed entirely unimpressed, casually claiming ownership of her rug like it was the villain of this one-act drama. Its tail curled menacingly, as if plotting how best to ruin her day.

Boet and Hubby, our reluctant heroes in this tale of domestic wildlife warfare, approached the eight-legged intruder with the caution of bomb disposal experts. “Don’t kill it,” I whispered to Hubby, as if sparing this tiny beast was going to earn us karmic gold stars. Di, on the other hand, was less concerned about its spiritual journey and more preoccupied with unleashing vengeance. “Look for the babies!” she barked at Boet, in a tone that suggested we were seconds away from a full-scale scorpion uprising.

The operation itself was a masterpiece of improvisation: as armed with a Tupperware container and a broom, our masculine heroes poked, prodded, and negotiated with the offending arachnid like it was a tenant refusing to vacate the premises. After some tense manoeuvring, the creature was triumphantly captured—a moment that felt less like a victory and more like surviving the world’s weirdest team-building exercise. With the beast safely secured, it was escorted to the grass verge outside the retirement village like some a criminal being granted parole. The scorpion, unbothered and probably plotting its return, scuttled off into the wilderness.

The boys, hearts racing and adrenaline pumping, decided that the only logical course of action was to embark on a heroic quest to Plettenberg in search of the brake shoes. Their determination was palpable—this was no ordinary errand; this was a mission to vanquish the offending dashboard light once and for all. Armed with tools, theories, and perhaps a touch of overconfidence, they set off, leaving behind a trail of oil stains and earnest discussions.

Meanwhile, Di was a whirlwind of nervous energy, pacing and fretting as though the fate of the retirement village was now in danger of a wildlife invasion. To calm her nerves (and perhaps mine), she decided that she would take me out for breakfast at the restaurant by the Elephant Park—a move that promised both distraction and sustenance.

We slid into Di's car—a vehicle that, much like its owner, had seen its fair share of adventures. Now, Di’s driving style is... well, let’s call it *unique*. It’s an unpredictable cocktail of road rage and surprising moments of saintly adherence to traffic laws. One moment, she’s letting someone merge with the grace of an angel, and the next, she’s hurling verbal daggers at a truck for existing in the same time zone as her bumper.

Her foot operated the accelerator as if she were auditioning for a documentary, and her brake work? Equal parts abrupt and theatrical. And yet, somehow, amid the occasional bouts of honking and muttered commentary about "idiots who shouldn’t have licenses," we crossed the main road and drove on the dirt road to the elephant sanctuary.

The restaurant was a charming, informal, open to the elements. Ideal for Di’s smoking habit. It was buzzing with the kind of relaxed energy that makes you want to linger over coffee. While I indulged in a flaky croissant, Di went all out with a substantial breakfast that could have fueled a marathon. Eggs, bacon, sausage, and coffee—she tackled it all with gusto, and by the end, she lit a cigarette with the triumphant air of someone who had conquered breakfast and declared herself thoroughly satisfied.

As I savoured the moment, a memory popped into my head—my niece had a friend who worked at the sanctuary nearby. A delightful soul, she had arrived from Denmark as a volunteer and, charmed by the elephants and the South African sunshine, had stayed on to become a permanent resident. As Di’s oldest daughter desperately wanted a job in animal care, as opposed to her hated career in the banking sector, I thought this may be a beneficial relationship for the family to embrace. I floated the idea of inviting her to join us, and Di, full to the brim with her breakfast feast, waved her cigarette in approval. “Sure,” she said, her tone as casual as her post-meal contentment.

A quick phone call later, and voilà—our elephant-tattooed friend strolled in, radiating the kind of charm and mystery that only someone with pachyderms etched on their skin can muster. She brought with her an air of adventure and enough stories to rival a bedtime storyteller on caffeine. Enthralled, I proposed relocating to Di’s cozy cottage to keep the elephantine tales flowing—a suggestion brimming with enthusiasm but sorely lacking foresight.

Rookie mistake!

Little did I know, Di’s distaste for tattoos ran so deep it bordered on the theatrical. A fact made it all the more baffling since her own daughter proudly bore three small ones. It wasn’t about the ink itself; it was an inexplicable, almost comical hatred of tattoos as a concept of having such inked people on her threshold. In the Elephant Park eating halls, it was fine, but not in her hallowed cottage. I could sense the temperature drop. The promising connection I’d envisioned halted faster than you could say “elephant stampede.”

After bidding au revoir to my elephant-printed friend, her stories still lingering in the air like faint echoes of adventure, Di took a moment to deliver her decree. With all the seriousness of a monarch protecting her realm, she informed me that I was absolutely *not* to invite my tattooed acquaintance to her cottage ever again. It was a royal edict, enforced with such conviction that I didn’t dare protest. Apparently, tattoos weren’t just a distaste—they were an affront to the sanctity of Di's Persian carpets and vintage artifacts. And so, I resigned myself to the notion that Di’s cottage would remain a tattoo-free zone and from henceforth I would meet at my artistic friends with the tattoos in a place of our choosing which would not include the retirement village.

Despite her apparent dislike for our tattooed acquaintance, Di had no issue holding onto her artistic creations like prized trophies. In fact, she took immense pleasure in showcasing these gifts to her friends, presenting them with the pride of a seasoned collector. Her flair for irony was undeniable: detesting the artist but enjoying the beauty of her work. It was the kind of display that left me amused and slightly bewildered, proving that Di never fails to keep things interesting as well as baffling.

## Red lights blinking

As one might expect, curiosity often lured me back to the scene of the mechanical masterpiece in progress, while our bakkie lost wheels and gained new brake pads. As a result, I accidentally became an honorary member of the male-exclusive brake pad installation committee. The method? Ingeniously primitive, naturally. The box of brake pads found its noble perch on a randomly placed tyre, the instructions untouched, as the two boys wrestled valiantly with their self-acquired knowledge.

Eventually, my patience wore thinner than the old brake pads, and I dared to disturb their realm by consulting the most scandalous of tools—*the instructions.* With great courage, I ventured to offer my findings aloud. This, of course, was met with a synchronized wave of dismissal that could rival a royal procession. They maintained their air of knowing superiority for a solid five minutes before, like a light bulb flickering to life, they realized I might actually have been onto something.

In an act of what they likely thought was subtle genius, they casually sauntered over to the tyre, plucked the instruction leaflet, and proceeded to approach it as if it were their own groundbreaking discovery. By then, I’d had enough. Shaking my head in a blend of disbelief and mild amusement, I made the only reasonable choice left I went for a walk. Sometimes, the best view of a marriage is from a safe distance.

One of the joys of retirement villages is that space is limited and my main entertainment was dodging hostile swans. My ambitious walk quickly turned into a standoff with these noble feathered adversaries, who hissed threateningly upon realizing I was, tragically, *not* a mobile snack dispenser. The immaculate gardens, while beautiful, offered the thrilling variety of a catalogue page. Before long, I found myself back at the cigarette-scented stoep, where my next grand adventure began.

The boys, self-appointed car whisperers, proudly declared they had solved the mystery of the malfunctioning bakkie wheels. “Let’s take it for a spin,” they said, with the confidence of the mechanical experts they now were. Eager for excitement, I climbed aboard, and off we went to the beach. Good choice! The waves were splendid, a hypnotic escape from the drama… until we headed back. As if summoned by dark forces, the dreaded warning light blinked back on, mocking us all.

That dreaded red light—the universal signal for "your day is about to unravel." It's almost poetic how a simple glowing indicator can carry the weight of doom and despair, like a tiny traffic light declaring a hard stop on any hope of smooth sailing. Honestly, it’s the automotive equivalent of a villain twirling their thin black handlebar moustache, laughing evilly while plotting chaos.

I welcomed the phone call from my eldest daughter at this point to unload my collective sorrows on her, but alas when it rains, it *monsoons*, in my world. As if the bakkie’s rebellion wasn’t enough, my French Renault Princess had decided to make her grand entrance into the Broken Car Olympics, waving a cheerful little R36,000 repair bill like a victory flag. Truly, what an overachiever she is.

I was left wondering if the cars are secretly conspiring against us in some twisted metal soap opera. Perhaps they’ve been chatting in the garage at night, plotting to bankrupt us one devastating repair at a time.

Honestly, at this rate, I’d start leaving subtle hints about the value of loyalty and low maintenance in the garage—maybe a framed photo of a trusty Toyota Cressida with the caption, “Be like this guy.”

I imagine that cloud of depression that hit me after this phone call had quite the dramatic entrance, too, shrouding my optimism like an overzealous weather system. My venting did not make it sting less!

At this low point in my life, entered classic Di—sweeping in like a whirlwind of privilege and unsolicited advice, clutching her signature “grand solutions” in one hand. The bakkie, with its audacious red light, was clearly the villain of the story, and Di, naturally, had the answer: *Sell it immediately!* Her declaration was brimming with the kind of confidence only possessed by someone who has never had to debate the price of bread, let alone a vehicle. Her proposed solution? A shiny, new vehicle which would cost us pensioners a casual one and a half million Rand. Di delivered her solution as though a new vehicle purchase is the equivalent of grabbing a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk at the shop. Easy peasy, of course, if your life operates on a magical currency system where money just… appears, unbidden, like rabbits from a hat when you tell your husband how mean he is being by putting you on a limit.

At my objection came the pièce de résistance. *“You can’t be that broke,”* she quipped, as if my personal finances were some sort of optional side quest I’d simply chosen to neglect.

As a side bar to give you sympathy with Di's reality, the concept of earning a living or balancing finances is as foreign as the idea of having to save money. Di's world is a utopia where practicality is an afterthought and grand schemes reign supreme. It’s a fascinating realm powered by an unshakable belief that financial hurdles are just pesky little inconveniences to be waved away. It’s the kind of outlook that could rival a fairytale with a limitless budget. And why not? After all, when you’ve never had to grind away at an eight -to-five hell to survive or nervously tried not to peek at your bank balance, why waste energy on numbers when word searches are so much more exciting? Cheque books and income spreadsheets are for mere mortals—Di’s world runs on imagination and privilege, where money flows like a plot twist in a novel: plentiful, dramatic, and defying reason. Limited money? Well, that’s merely a concept invented by us common folk to keep themselves tethered to mundane concerns like rent and grocery bills.

It’s almost charming in its obliviousness, though perhaps not practical when the bakkie light blinks menacingly at the rest of us. I felt like replying “Sure, Di. Let me just consult my piggy bank, which is brimming with hopes and dreams but surprisingly short on million Rand notes.”

So here I am, neck-deep in Di’s sparkling but fundamentally nonsensical approach to problem-solving, trying to decide if I should laugh, cry, or just pack it in altogether. Her imagination? Boundless. Her grasp on financial reality? Non-existent. And while she’s out here crafting elaborate fantasies of bakkie replacements like she’s starring in her own personal TV show, I’m the poor soul who’s had to fend for myself financially since the age of 14 and at this moment decades of hard-earned, no-nonsense survival is clashing spectacularly with her champagne bubble of privilege.

It was only natural, then, that my patience began wearing thin—so thin you could use it to cut glass. And when Di, with the audacity only someone who's never balanced a cheque book can muster, dismissed my practicality yet again, my tone shifted from polite to something a little sharper, a little spicier. Because honestly, there’s only so much whimsical nonsense one can tolerate before the veneer of civility cracks.

Wisdom came knocking quickly at the verbal door and helped me to channel my inner diplomat, which required a metaphorical biting my tongue so hard I half-expected it to file a formal complaint. With the patience of a saint—or perhaps just someone who knew better than to argue with Di—I made a mental note to draft a strongly worded letter to the receiver of revenue suggesting the implementation of an “imagination tax.” Surely, it would do wonders for the budget deficits created by people like Di, who dream in gold and think spreadsheets are optional accessories.

Cue Di, who, after single-handedly driving me to the brink of despair, immediately reverted to her favourite post-chaos persona: the benevolent problem solver. Bless her hopeful little heart, she decided the cure for my depression was, naturally, flowers. Because when the weight of financial vehicular ruin looms overhead, what better solution than a cheerful trip to the local nursery to spend money on things that wilt?

Meanwhile, the boys were engaged in what can only be described as an epic showdown of man versus machine, their phones at the ready as they battled Google in what I suspect resembled a cerebral WrestleMania. With the collective effort of two minds, one wheel, one tyre, and a box of brake pads, I had to admit their determination was almost inspiring—if not slightly terrifying.

Eventually, after a marathon of *Herculean* effort they triumphantly announced that the issue was the ABS sensor. They spent hours poking and fixing what they were sure was the problem, while I stood there unconvinced, the lone voice of reason amidst their misplaced confidence. Yet even I had to admit the problem seemed solved. Yet the bakkie was to prove my skepticism was not just valid; it was practically begging for an apology once the inevitable next issue rolled around.

While the boys put the bakkie through its final throes of testing, the nursery visit was nearly therapeutic. Di’s enthusiasm for plants is borderline contagious, and I almost managed to forget that the bakkie was likely scheming in the retirement village plotting its next act of rebellion. Almost. As the clouds parted momentarily amidst the greenery, I couldn’t help but wonder if “round two” was just a short drive away. With the way this saga was unfolding, I wouldn’t have been surprised to see the bakkie sprout legs and declare itself a Transformer and join in with the Renault in a destructive fury.

Faced with the stark realization that domestic peace was teetering dangerously close to me Googling “how to dispose of evidence,” the troops wisely raised a white flag. The solution? A diplomatic excursion to Nature’s Valley. It was the perfect compromise—close enough to avoid hawking the house for a tow truck but just far enough to pretend we weren’t tempting fate.

As a sidebar I must say that the Bakkie behaved like a loyal companion with their tender ministration’s for the rest of the vacation, until three hundred kilometres from home! At which point the rear wheel auditioned for a smoke machine at a rock concert. Wheels smoking, dreams shattered, and there we were , stranded like a beached whale duo at the mercy of a mechanic in Parys. My skeptic me unfortunately vindicated! Let’s just say I’ll be side-eyeing the Bakkie from now on like it’s plotting its next betrayal. Fool me once!

Back to pleasanter days and our proposed trip. Since we were planning for the great getaway ( In my mind more an escape) naturally, the Western Cape decided to make its dramatic entrance. After an entire week of gloriously hot weather while we wrestled with the cantankerous beast on wheels, the skies chose now—*of course* now—to turn sulky and miserable. Because why not? What’s an adventure without a dash of meteorological sabotage?

## Exercise, Escapes and disappointment

I must now take time to introduce the Western Cape. The Western Cape is a place so obnoxiously perfect that it could give even the most stunning puzzles an inferiority complex. Cameras start to take their own photos bewildering their owners in the beauty that is the Cape.

The beaches? A mix of heaven and hypothermia, where the postcard-perfect sand begs for footprints, but the water dares you to wade in without a wetsuit. Then there are the restaurants, with their divine dishes and divine arrogance, confidently charging a premium as though Gauteng’s diners are still discovering fire.

And let’s not forget the wines, the ultimate Cape mic drop. Each expensive glass is less about the taste and more about equipping drinkers with ammunition for years of smug, wine-soaked anecdotes at dinner parties. The beer craft brewers have joined the arms race, turning the region into an artisan alcohol carnival.

Some people compare the Western Cape to Switzerland, and sure, I’ll give them beauty points. Switzerland’s got its act together with its storybook meadows, crystal-clear lakes, and Alps so iconic they could moonlight as supermodels. But let’s face it—they’re missing one crucial element: the beach. Because nothing says “nature’s finest” like sand infiltrating every crevice while you battle seagulls for your lunch.

Now, the Garden Route doesn’t just whisper elegance; it flaunts it with a dramatic flair—pristine beaches, lush forests, and cliffs so rugged they look like they’ve stepped out of an action movie. Wild, untamed, and unapologetic, it’s nature’s way of saying, “Top this!” Sure, Switzerland can brag about its timekeeping skills, knives, skiing, and dreamlike hiking trails, but the Garden Route isn’t here to play nice. Instead, it offers an all-you-can-handle adventure buffet: surfing, hikes through the magical Tsitsikamma forests, waterfalls you can actually *swim in*, bungee jumping off Bloukrans Bridge (for the thrill-seekers), and a wildlife safari so diverse it makes spotting dolphins and whales seem almost casual. Throw in elephants, exotic birds, and, if you’re really lucky, a leopard, and suddenly snow just seems... cold.

And let’s not forget, the Garden Route serves all this with a side of better weather than our European counterparts—well, unless you find yourself in Nature’s Valley, where Mother Nature occasionally decides to throw a wet tantrum

Let me introduce you to the diva of all divas—the Cape coastal weather. She’s unpredictable, dramatic, and thrives on keeping you on your toes, or better yet, flat on your back if the wind has its way. Planning a day out by the Cape Coast? Adorable. The weather laughs at your itinerary and says, *"Not today, my dear!"*

One moment, it’s all sunshine and charm, encouraging you to bask in her glow with sunscreen and oversized shades. The second you apply the sunscreen It’s gone full drama queen, hiding behind clouds darker than your morning coffee. Don’t bother checking the forecast—it’s basically a creative writing project, and the cape weather is really good at fiction.

I feel I must mention the sudden rainstorm. Although the cape can be wetter than a waterfall in full flood, the sudden Cape rainstorm is another beast entirely. A Cape storm is a torrential audition for Poseidon’s Wrath, an action movie with a warning, not for sensitive viewers*.* In 30 seconds flat, you’re drenched to your very soul, standing there like a soggy extra in a disaster movie. Tried bringing an umbrella? Cute. Gale force winds will have it inverted faster than you can yell, “I’m getting wet!”

The cape people will advise you to pack for a day’s outing your sunscreen, your waterproof and wind proof jacket, a raft, and maybe a therapist, because the Cape coastal weather doesn’t do “mild.” She does chaos, and she does it fabulously.

Thus, it was when we decided to go to Nature’s Valley. So, we waited the weather out, opting instead to do the park run at Harkerville.

Now there may be some souls who do not know what a park run is.

Park Run is the weekly gathering of exercise overachievers, vitality members, reluctant joggers, and caffeine-deprived humans pretending getting out at 8 a.m. on a Saturday is a good idea. It's a "free, friendly, timed 5k event" (read: a sweaty social experiment where strangers bond over shared misery).

Sidebar: Vitality members are the elite athletes of absurd endurance, competing in Discovery's epic saga of "how many flaming hoops can you vault over to snag a couple of bucks off your gym membership?" It’s not health insurance, it’s an endless scavenger hunt disguised as self-improvement, where you’re rewarded with coffee and smoothie vouchers for the sheer athleticism of logging Olympic-level step counts.

Vitality isn’t just a health program—it’s a glossy, judgmental drill sergeant wrapped in app form, gently passive-aggressively nudging you to drink more water, rediscover the existence of vegetables, and pry yourself off the couch like a sloth on an eviction notice. Sure, it's brutal, but somehow, between the relentless reminders and the occasional guilt-induced sprint, you find yourself… begrudgingly motivated. Because nothing says self-improvement like being outsmarted by an app. And let’s not overlook the grand prize: those trusty smartwatches, "affordably" earned by making your heartbeat race like you’re escaping a pack of wild dogs.

It is easy to identify the quintessential Vitality park runner. Look for a modern-day fitness warrior decked out in three to four smartwatches, conveniently “borrowed” from family members who’ve tapped out of the exercise game but still want their points. With every swing of their arm, these devices tirelessly measure steps, heartbeats, and possibly their level of regret.

Vitality members, of course, earn points for almost anything sweaty—running, spinning, even the occasional dramatic attempt at yoga (which is really just sitting in stretchy pants wondering why downward dog is so hard). But the beauty of the system lies in its ruthless escalation. Every milestone unlocks yet another level of commitment, until Platinum status isn’t just a fitness achievement—it’s a full-blown lifestyle overhaul. By this point, the average member has sacrificed their social life, mastered the art of meal prep, and perfected the 24/7 exercise schedule, all for the glory of gym discounts and smoothie coupons. It’s fitness with flair... and a side of exhaustion.

Back to Parkrun. As in every race you've got the gazelles at the front, sprinting as though there's free pizza at the finish line, the middle-pack warriors aiming for "not last," and the leisurely strollers who just came for the selfies and the easy parking for the Harkerville market possibly with the need for some fitness points for Vitality.

Naturally in Parkrun there are those who we cannot forget. The superior people who need the mandatory smug post-run Instagram and or Facebook pic captioned: "Easy 5k to start the weekend. What's your excuse?"

We are that Parkrun power couple—well, sort of. Hubby’s the self-proclaimed gazelle, racing to the finish line like there's a medal waiting for him. I. on the other hand, approach Parkrun with more poise as I’m here for the vibes, not the sweat. While. Hubby takes off in a blur of determination, mentally competing with everyone from the cross-country kid to that guy with the double stroller. I set off at a leisurely stroll, knowing if you survive, there's usually coffee at the end. Motivation, right?

Unfortunately, Harkerville Parkrun is the casual Saturday stroll that secretly moonlights as a mountain expedition. As the Parkrun power couple our motivation was solid, of course. Boet had the night before dangled the promise of the Hakerville market delights in the field adjoining Parkrun and, more importantly, almond croissants. Say no more—I laced up my sneakers with the determination of someone who'd seen the light at the end of the 5k tunnel (and it smelled like pastry).

What they *don't* advertise, though, is that Harkerville Parkrun apparently doubles as an audition for an Everest base camp trek. Forget flat paths and gentle inclines—it’s rocks, roots, and trails that make you question if you are in a survival reality show. By 2.5 Km I was reconsidering if almond croissants were worth this betrayal. Unfortunately, there is only one way back to the end point and that was to complete the exercise through the rain and mud.

Thus, I finished having the street cred of having conquered Harkerville’s hidden Hunger Games. Who needs cardio when you’ve got vertical ascents.

Hakerville market was also the place Di decided to enlighten me with the wonders of Kombucha—a drink that tastes like it can’t decide whether it’s vinegar, fruit juice, or a failed science experiment. “It’s so good for you!” she chirped knowing just what an easy sell this is to a health nut.

Thus, I exited the Harkerville Market with a kombucha scoby, sore calves and an almond croissant. Having Kombucha by the way is like drinking a glass of murky pond water with floaties. Apparently, this magical elixir is packed with probiotics and promises to realign my chakras, improve my digestion, and maybe solve world peace.

By Sunday, the flood warnings had finally decided to chill, and we cautiously hit the road. The packing process was a study in contrasts. Our stuff? Packed in five minutes flat, like seasoned pros who’ve got places to be. Boet, on the other hand, treated his van like it was catering for an international summit—packing enough food to sustain a small African village.

And then, there was Di. Sweet, indecisive Di, standing in front of her cupboard like it held the answers to the universe.

“Do you think it will be hot?” she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

“Probably,” I replied, trying to sound reassuring.

“Will it be windy?” she pressed, her anxiety bubbling up.

“Definitely,” I shot back, because, well—it’s the Cape.

“Will it rain?” Di questioned like I secretly moonlighted as a meteorologist. And so, we waited, as one night's worth of clothing turned into a crisis management session with sufficient clothing options that could outfit an amateur theatre production Classic Di.

Back on the road, and for once, without Satan’s personal laser show blinking on the dashboard, I could finally unclench every muscle I didn’t realize was tense. The drive was pure magic—gorgeous scenery that almost made me forget my long-standing distrust of our treacherous Bakkie. Naturally, we decided to hit the beach before heading to the campsite, because who doesn’t love acres of pristine white sand and the illusion of calm?

The sand was the stuff of postcards—clean, soft, beautiful and hot enough to burn your feet. But then came the sea, which couldn’t wait to remind us that it wasn’t here for fun or games. It greeted us like a cold-hearted villain, each wave flinging icy spray with the enthusiasm of a slap across the face. I’m convinced it was colder than revenge. Scenic? Absolutely. Inviting? Only if you’re secretly an ice cube.

After a stroll along the beach that turned into a full-blown fisherman meet-and-greet, Boet suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. With a voice dripping in pure tragedy, he announced his unforgivable oversight: he’d forgotten his fishing rods. The man looked as if someone had cancelled summer itself. His dreams of beachside angling shattered.

Arriving at the San Park campsite didn’t lighten the mood initially. The place greeted us with mud—enough mud to make a dramatic landslide seem like a distinct possibility. We handed over our annual Wild Card fee with the kind of grim resignation you reserve for tax season, added in the campsite costs, and finally set out to find the perfect spot to put our woes behind us.

And there it was—a corner of paradise tucked beneath towering trees, their leaves whispering ancient secrets. The air was thick with the earthy scent of the forest, wrapping around us in the kind of quiet that felt sacred. It was a balm for our battered spirits. Even Boet began to relax, the lure of nature somehow soothing the sting of his forgotten fishing rods. Sometimes the forest has a way of healing you, even when you don’t ask.

Supper was, naturally, a braai—because what else could perfectly round off a day like this? But somehow, the smoky sizzle of the grill was transformed into an almost divine experience, framed by the shimmer of countless stars above and the distant, rhythmic thump of the sea reminding us we were part of something much bigger. In that moment, I made a quiet vow to return and immerse myself in this rare, unspoiled beauty for longer. After all, even a broken bakkie seems like a small price to pay for a slice of paradise like this.

## Plank Sinatra

Boet’s pride and joy, as well as most his free time is spent with his boat. This wooden edifice is the oldest boat on the Knysna lagoon and has given us many happy trips out into the lagoon itself.

We could state that this story is about Boet and his grand dame of the Knysna lagoon which could be a love story for the ages! ( spoiler alert: this book is about us, not the boat. If you like boats write your own story.)

Boet’s floating relic, was more of splinter than ship when bought, and has been lovingly restored by the man himself. It is the apple of his eye and the bottomless pit for his wallet. With enough varnish to single-handedly keep the hardware store in business and a maintenance schedule more demanding than a Formula 1 car, this ancient marvel remains valiantly afloat.

Moored at the Knysna Yacht Club which should really consider renaming itself in his honour. After all, Boet’s tireless dedication to their finest offerings—cold beers and slightly soggy chips—has probably singlehandedly rescued them from financial ruin. It would be less of a club without Boet and his bottomless thirst.

Let’s also not forget his boat’s noble contribution to the local economy: supporting marine mechanics, varnish producers, and the guy who replaces ropes for mooring for a living. With each creak of its weathered planks, this boat doesn’t just float—it holds up an entire ecosystem of suppliers and yacht club camaraderie. Boet and his splintered sidekick deserve their own plaque at the jetty!

It is therefore only fitting that the noble wooden dame should also be honoured when there are races. Naturally, the boat deserves a place of honor amidst the races, basking in all its creaky glory as the officials hoot horns and toast with frothy mugs under the unforgiving glare of the Knysna sun.

And of course, Hubby thrives in these moments. He likes to be front and centre, flashing a grin as wide as the lagoon itself, soaking in the festive atmosphere as if he’s just steered the boat through a tempestuous Cape storm. It's a scene worthy of song—or perhaps a beer-soaked ballad sung by grateful yacht club members.

Is it more about supporting Boet and his floating legacy, or is it an excellent excuse to dive into the chips and drinks, all while roasting under the South African sun? Either way, it’s a classic tale of camaraderie, wooden boats, and maybe a smidge of over-the-top celebration..

Of course, nothing says "valiant seafarers" quite like the triumphant return of Boet's band of sun-kissed heroes, bearing tales of maritime glory and… well, suspiciously crisp skin tones! A chilled beer becomes the ultimate elixir, soothing their throats while perhaps conveniently distracting from the lobster-like hue of their arms.

It’s a fitting ritual, really—the noble sacrifice of enduring the blazing sun in pursuit of watery adventures, only to be rewarded with camaraderie, chips, and a generous helping of SPF hindsight. Truly embodies the phrase: “burn bright, drink light.”

The boat has given us endless fun on the lagoon. There’s something delightfully charming about turning a not-so-spacious rocking chair of a boat into a floating bistro, where the atmosphere is a mix of fresh air, distant seagull squawks, and the occasional creak that makes you wonder if today’s the day the boat decides to take a little swim.

We normally edge out carefully from the moorings, avoiding the wakes of other less polite speedboats as Boet uses his captain’s knowledge to search for a place to anchor out of the wind. This place will be where we can eat and quaff wine. It is the perfect image of nautical indulgence with us swaying gently on the lagoon, precariously balancing cheese, wine, and freshly baked bread on a deck that offers all the stability of a yoga ball in a windstorm. It is a skill just to ensure the wine glasses don’t tip into the lagoon before the first sip is even taken!

Boet is aware of the dangers of the glass shattering and falling into his beloved’s bowels, so he has with true Scottish ability for saving a buck, found the solution. Boet’s ingenuity is quite astounding as a budget-friendly captain and master problem-solver! He uses ice cream cups . These plastic cups are the pinnacle of practical brilliance, shielding his beloved vessel from rogue shards of glass with style and undeniable frugality. No run-of-the-mill cups will do, of course; these treasures must hail from the Food Lovers Market ice cream bar in Knysna, adding a touch of gourmet flair to this nautical affair.

But the pièce de résistance is Boet’s noble sacrifice—a heartfelt commitment to buying *more ice cream* when the guest list surpasses two. Truly, the man is a beacon of generosity, selflessly expanding his dessert reserves for the good of boat and brethren. Who knew safety measures could be so deliciously fulfilling?

If he still needs more ice cream cups then his beloved safely ensconced back at the retirement home, will also be the recipient of his magnanimous shopping trip. Despite her diabetes and a cloud of smoke that could rival a forest fire, she will graciously accept this magnanimous gesture. After all, who can say no to a treat that doubles as a practical boat accessory?

The reason for the issue with this magnanimous gesture is simply a problem of logistics. From Knysna to Plettenberg is at best a twenty-minute trip, barring the inconvenience of other people on the national road connecting the two points. The journey from Knysna to Plettenberg Bay, while scenic and straightforward in theory, quickly becomes a test of patience when other road users insist on being, well, *present*.

Boet’s ice cream crusade, then, becomes a delicate dance against the clock. Even with the best intentions, every red light, leisurely driver, and surprise roadwork feels like an affront to his mission.

The ride itself becomes a spectacle. With each kilometre travelled, the ice cream transforms into a sticky soup that seems determined to escape its plastic prison. Since I am always in the back seat, it is me who has a heroic attempt to save it. This attempt involves angling the cup, licking my fingers and praying that gravity takes pity on me.

Arriving triumphantly at the retirement home with what can only be described as ice cream’s ghost, Boet will proudly present this offering of a faint puddle of vanilla. Di accepts graciously with a cigarette in one hand and immediately tries to refreeze the soggy mess which explains the array of ice cream in their freezer.

As golden hour approaches, Boet finishes his usual argument trying to convince Di a trip on the boat is just the fresh air she needs. An air of defeat bathes him as he realizes now is the perfect time to glide onto the lagoon before the sun tips its hat to the horizon. It's a delicate balancing act, savoring those magical moments when the light dances on the water, without pushing your luck and turning docking into a twilight adventure.

Sans di, we climb into his chariot for the journey back to Knysna. The trip takes forever. a slow-motion odyssey where time stretches like a particularly stubborn piece of melted cheese. The road winds on endlessly, framed by scenic views that have long since lost their charm.

Boet stoically navigates the trials of other drivers, occasional potholes, and the sheer monotony of it all. By the time Knysna comes into view, the chariot's weary travellers truly are ready to raid the snack stash for consolation cheese and biscuits.

The air is cool, the shadows long, and the scene set for our majestic voyage to Boet's meticulously chosen haven, where strategy meets serenity. We wave at the leisurely paddling canoes, who whiz past like Formula 1 racers in comparison to our stately wooden progress. The boat, loyal yet leisurely, drifts with all the dignified grace of retirees channelling their inner tortoise: steady, unwavering, and blissfully indifferent to speed limits.

Each creak of the wooden dame becomes a soundtrack to this calm, unhurried expedition, accompanied by amused glances from canoeists whose brisk strokes outpace the little engines puttering glide. For us, with Boet, ever the mastermind, standing with our hair blowing as we look forward to finding that spot which is worth every deliberate moment. After all, it's not about the destination or the pace—it’s about savouring the journey, cheese in hand, and proving to the lagoon that slower truly means savvier

When anchored, the boat gently sways while the meticulously prepared feast awaits its moment. It is not just a trip out on the lagoon; it's an occasion, a ritual, a celebration of wood, history, water, and wandering souls.

The sun slowly sinks, casting its golden farewell across the rippling waters, while the boat sways gently in agreement with the evening breeze. The last crumbs of artisan bread mingle with the remnants of fine cheese, and the nonexistent clink of plastic wine glasses celebrates one final toast to the day’s quiet triumph. The world feels a little smaller, simpler, and sweeter aboard this humble vessel—a timeless dance of flavors, laughter, and creaking planks. But with the waning of the sun so begins the gentle race back to the jetty, ensuring we are firmly anchored before darkness steals the show.

As the twilight takes hold, the rocking boat becomes not just a vehicle, but a sanctuary, carrying its passengers not toward a destination but into a shared moment of joy and peace. We pop into the yacht club to have the final beer before we speed off home. Bon voyage to the heart, to the boat, as we are now well-fed and content.

## Whose idea was this anyway?”

The descriptively named Baviaanskloof is a name that translates to "Valley of Baboons," which should've been our first clue to avoid it altogether and find a nice spa with hot water and massages. But no, armed with Boet’s eternal optimism, a fridge full of homemade beer, and my trusty stack of expired maps (because why spend money on updated ones when you can embrace chaos for free?), we decided to tackle the untamed wilderness head-on.

The planning—or lack thereof—went something like this: Boet: “Baviaanskloof is going to be epic. Imagine the views, the adventure!” Me: “Do they have proper roads?” Boet (pausing to down a beer): “Proper roads are for amateurs. We're hardcore four by four!” Husband quaffs his beer in agreement with the usual grin on his face he permanently wears when he is with his twin. Me (sipping wine because I’m the classier party): “Fine, but I’m bringing snacks. And by snacks, I mean enough vegetarian food to sustain us when we get lost.”

Sidebar: Ah, yes—my vegetarianism, the eternal source of bafflement for boet and his wife, who think “vegetarian” is a fancy way of saying “rabbit impersonator or terminally ill sister- in- law.” Every meal becomes an interrogation: “So, you’re telling me you don’t want the braai wors? Not even one little piece of chicken? Are you *sure* you’re South African?” The continual chicken jokes- ‘ja chicken is a vegetable!” Braais are a trying ritual of smelling delicious food cooking while I’m stuck munching on a veggie burger, which, let’s be honest, tastes like disappointment served on a carboard bun.

Then there’s the constant fear of “hidden meat,” because in a meat eater’s world, anything can be improved by “just a sprinkle” of biltong dust or a bit of bacon. By the end of the trip, I am not just a vegetarian, I am a *warrior* who has dodged meat ambushes and survived a thousand judgmental stares. Legends should be told of my tofu resilience.

Back to our journey. the great Monday escape plan by Hubby and I, to get down to Boet in the Cape, was masterfully devised to dodge traffic and embark on a leisurely journey, fueled by a healthy dose of old-age enthusiasm and optimism. We set off with grand visions of smooth roads and carefree days, planning to stretch the trip into three relaxing stops before we hit Baviaanskloof with Boet at Uniondale on the Thursday.

Our first stop is normally a tiny village called Orania. A favourite place of mine with a fantastic campsite on the Orange river. Stopping at the campground always feels like stepping into a time capsule of genuine warmth and old-school charm, the kind you’d expect when visiting your favourite uncle’s farm. It had not changed from the year before. The locals have mastered the art of making visitors feel like part of the family, with smiles and welcomes so heartfelt, we half expected someone to offer us fresh-baked bread. It is a little town where every interaction feels like a reunion.

Orania was meant to be a peaceful pause but instead turned into a vehicular nightmare. Spotting oil on the ground beneath the bakkie—freshly blessed by the mechanic with a “green light to go” felt like discovering a plot twist in a bad soap opera. Horror and disaster combined, leaving us clutching heads as visions of repair bills danced cruelly in our minds.

Hubby, ever the resourceful one, sprang into action, rallying the local cavalry in the form of Orania’s ever-helpful farmers. With Afrikaans as the lingua franca, the scene became a mix of earnest discussions, head-scratching diagnostics, and offers of various tools, covers to lie on and jacks. A really heartwarming scene out of a feel-good movie. They should rename the place:

Orania, where the kindness of strangers meets the plentiful supply of practical advice.

Boet upon hearing of the calamity, from his brother via their daily communication, prepared himself like a seasoned adventurer, tools at the ready and an arsenal of moral support to boot. I could see him in my mind’s eye ,standing heroically by his garage, armed with spanners and encouragement, ready to swoop in and save the day if necessary. Especially after reality once again decided to spice things up.

Despite all the help, determination, prayers and entreaties to a higher being, the elusive seal remained as mythical as a unicorn, stubbornly refusing to be found in the wilderness. The situation teetered on the edge of comedic tragedy as every effort to track it down led to the same dead end. The journey, our trip to Boet—hanging precariously by a thread, teetering on the edge of calamity. Naturally, I was all for turning back, because who wouldn’t want to endure the joy of another mechanical visit for a spirited chat about seals and misfortune? After all, nothing soothes the soul quite like the smell of grease and a debate over who’s to blame for the mess. I also suggested we sell the bakkie at this point. We sat metaphorically with our head in our hands, unable to decide what was best to be done.

Enter the superior logic of Boet, the unwavering optimist, swooping in with the fact salvation was just around the metaphorical corner at Beaufort Wes, rather than a soul-crushing 600 km of limping trek back to our homestead. Armed with sheer conviction and a wrench or two, he managed to convince his brother that pressing forward was not an act of madness but, in fact, the sensible choice. Because, really, who needs peace of mind when you’ve got the comforting uncertainty of “closer salvation”? My husband made a firm and decisive decision. With our hearts in our mouths, we set out on roads with potholes the size of craters and breaks for hubby taking constant reading of the oil in his diff.

Beaufort West was a place now elevated to the status of “last hope” in the adventure saga. With Boet on standby, hubby felt safe with his brother’s safety net made of wrenches, patience, and just a touch of off-road camaraderie.

With every jolt of the rear wheel reminding me of the ticking time bomb beneath, the suggestion to make it to Beaufort West felt both daunting and oddly dramatic, like the final leg of a perilous quest.

Beaufort West, the oldest municipality in the country has now descended into one of those one-horse towns where even the horse seems to have packed its bags and left for greener pastures. With hopes dangling by a thread, we pulled into the Isuzu garage on the main street—a place that practically radiated mechanical salvation from the outside. But alas, after a deep and earnest conversation involving furrowed brows and much headshaking we emerged as defeated as the poor bakkie itself. Truly, hope didn’t just fall; it plummeted like a lead balloon.

We decided to find a place to overnight and consider our options. I found my trusty maps and there was a beacon called the Wagon Wheel campsite. Pulling in we found its promise of rustic charm, to be more a masterpiece of subtle robbery, so we exited, with me holding the map in my grubby paw and earnestly consulting Google.

Googlemaps gave us a shining suggestion: the SAN Park’s Karoo National Park. A brilliant idea in theory, to which hubby begrudgingly agreed—*if* it wasn’t too far out of town. Because after all, nothing says adventure quite like navigating another stretch of questionable roads with a possibly disintegrating rear wheel.

The Karoo National Par is where delightful hospitality meets sparkling cleanliness, and pensioner discounts practically beckon you like a VIP pass to paradise. We entered with relief, paid the fee, and then turned our collective attention to the ever-mysterious rear wheel after dodging some tortoises that came over to investigate. Hubby, equipped with determination and questionable contortion skills, crawled under the "offending area," as if preparing for a dramatic showdown with vehicular fate.

That’s when it happened—the stunning discovery worthy of an episode on Discovery Channel. The wheel hadn't lost oil, oh no—oil had been busy relocating, clearly deciding the diff was its new luxury condo. The diff was, in fact, overfull, creating a scenario of mechanical chaos that was equal parts absurd and infuriating.

Enter the humble cooldrink bottle, hastily repurposed into the ultimate oil-draining tool. Hubby wielded it with the precision of an off-road MacGyver, liberating excess oil while a large tortoise stood nearby, staring with the kind of quizzical expression that screamed, “Humans are weird.”

This impromptu wildlife-meets-mechanics moment was followed by yet another lengthy telephonic male consultation session filled with nods, grunts, and gestures to the heavens—and the solemn agreement that dawdling was no longer an option. Neither was meeting in Uniondale and Boet’s house had officially become the next destination.

Early next morning we set off, determined to conquer the last stretch and reach the doubtful haven of Boets retirement cottage with its promise of mechanical salvation. We utilized the time-honored town-hopping strategy “because nothing calms the nerves during a stress-ridden journey quite like watching town names pass by in rapid succession, each one offering the fleeting hope of salvation. Boet, of course, played the role of Mission Control, diligently checking in as if orchestrating a high-stakes space mission instead of a bakkie's perilous trek. His phone calls were equal parts reassuring and relentless, keeping us on track while also ensuring we couldn't even momentarily forget the possible drama unfolding beneath the vehicle.

Finally, George materialized, it was greeted with equal parts relief and exasperation. But of course, why settle for half-measures? The decision was made to up the ante and trek onward to Plettenberg Bay—because when dealing with an "offending wheel," why not aim for detailed analysis in style in the driveway of a senior retirement village.

Boet the sentinel of dubious home security, was standing watch like a loyal guard dog who misplaced his leash. His solemn march to the driveway was nothing short of ceremonious, guiding us to an appointed sacred site for vehicular diagnostics and existential debates. The driveway, naturally, soon became the stage for a spirited discussion—filled with theories, suggestions, and no doubt, the occasional wave of animated hand gestures.

Realizing that no great mystery can be solved on an empty stomach (or without some liquid courage), the boys took the only logical next step: lunch in Plettenberg bay at the yacht club. Over cold beers and the soothing backdrop of non-existential whales and dolphins who despite my entreaties were not casually appearing as if they were part of the support team, the problem was dissected in real-time. Boet had already done a search for the wheel seal and was a little put out to find, despite his entreaties, his provider had failed him. The promised wheel seal coming from George was taking longer than the bakkie itself had taken.

The next morning the saga continue becoming a classic case of "fix one problem, discover ten more." Off the twins went to Plettenberg, full of hope and determination, only to return with the ordered wheel seal that, in a delightful plot twist, was the wrong size. Because of course, why should anything be simple when it comes to bakkie drama?

Cue the frantic phone call to the mechanic, who promptly launched into an impromptu lecture on the intricate dynamics of wheel seals and mysterious oil migrations. Armed with this new knowledge and a shared sense of mechanical enlightenment, the boys unravelled the real issue—oil, the escape artist, had managed to trap itself between the wheel seal and some other perplexing part of the bakkie's inner workings. A problem so convoluted, it practically deserved its own PhD thesis.

With their bond now solidified through shared oily adversity, the boys turned their united efforts on me —the voice of reason and pragmatism—insisting that selling the bakkie, *hubby’s pride and joy,* was simply unthinkable.

The combined male barrage was so powerful it could rewrite history and mend international relations in one fell swoop. American presidents would be reduced to tears; the Middle East, shaking hands in newfound harmony; and Communist parties, suddenly singing the praises of capitalism. Truly, this was no ordinary argument—it was a masterclass in persuasion, a verbal symphony capable of moving mountains.

If only this logic could be bottled and distributed, the world might just become a utopia overnight. Alas, it was reserved for the noble cause of convincing me to keep the bakkie—hubby’s pride and joy—and endure its quirks for the sake of adventure. Who knew a wheel seal could inspire such diplomatic brilliance?

I must mention on my broken defence that both Boet and our bakkies are old, and together sound like a twosome auditioning for the lead role in *Death Trap: The Musical*? Boet hass a vehicle that is a proud 34 years of age while ours comes in at a young 16. After two further days of tinkering with said vehicles to make sure the wheels went round on both vehicles, It was decided Sunday was the D day, come hell or highwater that we would leave to explorr the Baviaans. And so Sunday off we went, hurtling towards disaster with nothing but dreams, rain of Biblical proportions and dangerously low cell phone reception to guide us.

Sidebar: First some information-the Baviaanskloof is just under 200 kilometers in length and bounded by two mountain ranges: the Baviaanskloof Mountains on the north and the Kouga mountains on the south side. Nothing to worry about there. Its in a valley, so how could rain be a problem? Naturally, we didn’t bother checking the weather forecast in that area, because who needs logic when you have blind confidence and two rusty old bakkies.

The day of departure arrived not just with rain, but with rain's less subtle cousin: mud. Getting out the retirement village was a little challenging with the grass being soaked and our camper lid having decided I needed an impromptu shower. I was a good sport about it, merely looking at a few sales ads for a nice new vehicle.

The first few kilometres were smooth sailing, which was all the encouragement the twins half that I had married needed to consider himself a “4 x4 bushwhacking legend.” Then suddenly the tar road ended and the mud bath began. Any lingering doubts about "maybe it’ll just be damp" were swiftly washed away, along with any hope of keeping the vehicle clean or our nerves intact. Nature, in her infinite wisdom, had decided to eliminate all suspense by transforming the dirt road into something resembling a chocolate fondue fountain gone rogue.

As the rain continued its relentless work, the dirt road seemed to sneer at our optimism, evolving into an obstacle course designed to test not just our driving skills but our willpower It was a little hairy, the boys are in truth both excellent drivers and Di and I were on top of things. She only smoked two cigarettes out of the car, while I found coffee which thankfully was not made from acorn grounds at an elite establishment called Angie’s G-spot.

Obviously this was a high-class country restaurant advertising, hot beer and bad service. Trying to find provisions to go with the instant coffee was a little more difficult, since Angie’s g spot only had burgers- of the meat variety, but Di came to the rescue and liberated her barrel of biscuits, which she had so far successfully concealed from Boet

We were good, mud to our eyeballs but no real issues and mud washes off. We finally reached Uniondale and I asked how far the first campsite was- again rookie mistake!

“Not far now” said boet filling up his second diesel tank. Husband looks at fuel gauge- “nah should be good!” Me looking at an outdated map and subsequently offering to fill up the car myself if he didn’t. Finally, he submits to the obviously superior advice and pulls in to fill up the bakkie. I disappear to find some real coffee for my expresso maker and a loo. A successful trip which required batting off a ravenous hoard of beggars. Boet in front to lead the way, and we are ready for the dirt road.

Sand roads as a rule are nature’s very own rollercoasters, except with more dust and less safety. This particular one was a Kingda Ka contender. The twins were having the time of their lives, whooping with joy as if every pothole was a personal trampoline. Meanwhile, Di and I were less enthused, gripping the seats for dear life and contemplating the life choices that had brought us here. After one particularly enthusiastic bump, I had to physically dislodge a boob from my ear and rearrange my dignity.

Upon arrival at the first camp, we were greeted by Boet’s friends, a charming couple of self-appointed braai experts and amateur comedians. The main topic of amusing conversation, of course, was me—the vegetarian. “So, like, what do you even eat? Grass?” one of them asked, as if I were a grazing impala. I smiled sweetly and resisted the urge to suggest that their cholesterol levels might benefit from a little grass themselves. What a delightful start! Lovely people, otherwise, serious foodies and even more serious wine drinkers- 5 litres of okay box wine was not going to be nearly enough for a night quaffing at this waterhole. After mutual admiring of the campers the serious stuff started. The food had to be cooked the Souf Afrikan way.

The way they cook in the Souf Afrika- is simple real men braai!

Let me introduce you, dear readers, to the braai—South Africa’s sacred culinary altar, revered by all and guarded by its encrusted, blackened grid that looks more like an archaeological relic than cooking equipment. In this case it was a contraption that could generously be described as a "rusty steel box" on two wheels, with a wobbly stand on the other side, looking like it was one good sneeze away from collapsing. Let’s just say calling it a “braai barrel” is the diplomatic choice, because the words I *really* want to use might cause a nationwide uproar and a bounty on my head.

In this particular tragedy, the braai barrel was demoted to a wandering vagabond, thanks to a gusty wind with an apparent identity crisis—it wasn’t sure if it wanted to be a tornado or just a very inconvenient breeze.

Boet thought the perfect spot for the braai would be behind the little area where we were sitting. which, as it turned out, was a wind tunnel cleverly disguised as a campsite. As soon as the fire was lit, the wind decided to join the party, whipping smoke, flames, and ash into an artistic interpretation of manic Monday.

“Move it to the left,” someone suggested, as if the wind would respect a simple relocation. So off went the braai barrel, this wobbling metal contraption wheeled by three sweating, muttering individuals, while I researched burn wound treatment. Ten minutes later, the wind shifted. “No, no, back to the right!” It was like watching a poorly choreographed braai-themed ballet, with the braai barrel a prima donna ballerina carried by her sweating co-stars.

By the time the men found a “less windy” spot (spoiler: there wasn’t one), the coals had decided they’d had enough of the party and were barely smouldering. Boet, ever the optimist, insisted he could “get it going again” by fanning it with a cardboard box (the one which had previously housed the first 3 litres of wine) since he couldn’t find his professional braai blower. (Sidebar: Souf Afrikan men take braais seriously and every acceptable camper should carry a bag of charcoal, a selection of surgical braai instruments and wood). The result of Boets industrious fanning? A cloud of ash so thick it could’ve been mistaken for a forest fire, and a singed cardboard box. A lonely flame dared to raise its head and was immediately fed with charcoal and wood with the same care that you give a newborn baby.

True to the top braai requirements, all participants eventually eat slightly warm undercooked boerewors(farmer sausage) steak and burnt chops, seasoned generously with ash, braai salt and frustration, while pretending it is delicious. I had a cardboard patty with salad. The wind, of course, howled with laughter the entire time. Classic braai experience.

But wait, we weren’t yet in the Baviaanskloof proper-that fun was still ahead. The next day after checking out the Kudu, which the campsite owner had shot, the various farm implements and ahhing over a lawnmower with a Toyota engine, we decided to part company with Boet’s friends, who were going to return back to their abode. Sensible souls those two.

“ You’ll love the new experiences” I was told as they roared off in the direction of civilisation. Sarcastic sods!

“Road here was a bit rough Boet.” Understated one twin to the other. Di looks up from a half-smoked packet of cigarettes with coffee in hand and fishes out another pack of lung erosion sticks from her stash for the drive.

“What is the road like in the kloof” I say innocently.

Boet thinks,’ Ja it was a bit rough in sections but wasn’t bad last time I was here!” Di grabs another pack of tar torpedoes from her stash and checks the fluid level in her lighter.

I ensure I have my most serious over shoulder boulder holder tightly in place just in case and with a last lingering look at the bathroom, we barge ahead, rattling and rolling till we reached the gates of the Baviaanskloof proper.

The Baviaanskloof is a UNESCO site. It was declared a World Heritage Site in 2004 and is considered one of the richest plant regions in the world, so I expected a little rural charm, but confidently looked forward to smoother roads, good world class planning and a spot of game viewing. After all the place is supposed to be a tourist attraction. I neglected to factor in corrupt government officials and a decided lack of national interest from the ruling parties in provincial government. Rookie South African Mistake!

The map said the 200KM drive could be done in just three hours, but we had agreed to spend a night in the kloof enjoying the paradise of untouched beauty, bountiful flora, watching the butterflies swaning past and swimming in some waterhole like water sylphs. Definitely, I thought blithely it will be delightful to be in the countryside, far from pollution and the rat race. In addition, the area is arid, so In other words no more rain , as the weather was sure to be nice. After all the rain a bit of sunshine would be quite pleasant..

The charming lady at the office took our money and wished us a pleasant trip without the slightest indication of the hell that was going to be ahead. No maps were offered, but I had my trusty print out of the Bavianskloof- so we were good. The sun was shining, the sky blue and I was confident, for at least two minutes.

Di had her pack of nicotine ninjas and was out the vehicle in front puffing madly. The pungent aroma wafted over to us with all the subtlety of a marching brass band, reminding everyone within a kilometer radius that she was keeping the tobacco industry alive single-handedly. As she puffed away, smoke drifted back on the wind, ensuring no one in the vicinity was left out of the joy of secondhand smoke. and the strong smell of ashtray wafted to us. The perfect cough catalyst. I couldn’t wait to get into the fresh countryside air. I hurried back to our waiting vehicle, determined to be a happy little camper.

I plugged a joyful CD into our faded CD system, which complied happily. The speakers belting out tunes from the distant past, transforming the car into a rolling time machine of sunshine. The first few hundred meters felt like the beginning of a blockbuster movie: pristine nature, a slightly bumpy but manageable road, and the promise of peace and serenity. What could possibly go wrong?

Then, like a dramatic plot twist, reality crashed down with the finesse of a bull in a china shop. The "road" revealed itself as less road and more “rocky obstacle course,” desperately yearning for a grader’s loving touch. But even that could have been forgiven—after all, you were adventurers, explorers on a quest for tranquillity.

The dirt roads—sorry, *dirt suggestions* became brutal. And then, the final blow: the complete and utter betrayal of modern technology. No cell signal. NONE. The cheerful music suddenly felt like a cruel joke as the realization sank in—we were stranded in nature’s very own Bermuda Triangle, with only our outdated CD player and questionable driving skills to guide us through. I’m pretty sure even the baboons were laughing at us as we bounced along, the bakkies rattling like a tin can full of angry marbles. Donkeys exited the road hee hawing hysterically as we bounced along. The flora began enthusing in approximately a thousand ways to test the human patience and paint work on our vehicles.

Picture this: you’re on a dirt road so narrow it might as well be a balance beam in some gym, surrounded by nature's finest collection of jagged rocks and overgrown bushes strategically placed for maximum tire destruction.

By the end of hour one we were no longer ready to commune with nature—but ready to try and survive it. 5 of the 72 kms to our campsite had been traveled. It had to get better. Spoiler alert: it didn’t!

I had read that the Baviaaanskloof' endemism level of 31.9% has earned it the title "hottest" of biodiversity hotspots, with three of the planet's 34 hotspots located in the Kloof. While I cannot attest to that truth, the kloof certainly lived up to the hottest hotspot. 30 degrees Celsius and climbing.

Yup it would be Epic!

## Nature’s Car Wash

I have often thought the universe has a dangerously twisted sense of humour. There I was, staring down at my once-respectable pants, now permanently dyed a charming shade of “rustic mud brown” courtesy of the running board on our vehicle. Wet wipes were proving totally inadequate to the vast quantity of nature on the back of my calf. With a sigh, I muttered a wish for a clean car. I felt I could not again impress nature onto my legs on alighting from our chariot with any form of style. Unknowingly I had summoned the wrathful gods of irony. And like magic—voilà!—the dirt tracks ahead transformed into a fully operational flood plain. Careful what you wish for, right?

Leading the convoy, Boet, who, in a grand gesture of love and selflessness (note the sarcasm), decided Di would test the water depth. “Better you than me,” he quipped, watching her wade into the roaring torrent like a contestant in some cruel survival show. Meanwhile, I grabbed my bag, hoisted my feet onto the dashboard, and assumed the position of the world’s least-helpful passenger.

As the water surged around the tires, Boet shouted over the cacophony of nature, “Don’t worry! With the snorkel, you can go underwater and still be okay!” Oh, how reassuring. Nothing makes you feel safer than comparing your family car to a submarine during a raging flood. I offered a less-than-enthusiastic thumbs-up while imagining how my obituary would read: *“Died in the noble pursuit of clean trousers.”*

Of course, we made it across—not really soaked, but severely stressed, and probably one more puddle away from losing all sanity. The car was not clean, yes it now had mud streaks with the dust, and with numerous more such crossings my nerves were to be forever scarred. Moral of the story? Never wish for anything. The gods are always listening, and they’re *always* in the mood for a laugh.

So, we went through flood plain after flood plain. Picture this road that’s become a river's impromptu playground. The dirt (or what’s left of it) disappears under an ambitious sheet of rushing water that sparkles innocently in the sunlight, as if it’s not plotting to sweep away anything foolish enough to cross. Gleaming water is nature’s illusion of serene beauty while secretly harbouring potholes that could swallow small vehicles whole. These stealthy craters lurk just beneath the surface, their impressive depth disguised by shimmering reflections that scream, “You’re safe, come on in!”

Driving through this treacherous expanse turns into a twisted game of roulette, where each tire roll holds the thrilling possibility of an impromptu swimming lesson. One moment, you’re gliding along the flooded plain, feeling victorious; the next, your car has plunged into a pothole so deep you’re wondering if you should have packed scuba gear.

The edges of the road blur into chaos—muddy banks collapsing into the water, random debris floating by as if auditioning for a disaster movie, and a helpful sign that used to warn about flooding now mostly submerged and waving its metaphorical white flag. The river, overexcited with its new real estate, rushes across the road like it’s late for a meeting, creating mini rapids that laugh at your puny notions of "off-road capabilities."

When you escape the clutches of Neptune, the remaining road's potholes add an extra challenge, transforming into small lakes, as if the river’s overflow isn’t enough drama. If you're lucky, a stray log might pass by, cheerfully aiming for your vehicle like nature's version of dodgeball.

By the second flood plain I had given up all semblance of family unity. “let him go first” I shouted with my hand on the hand brake, as my beloved prepared to follow his twin. “you may be prepared to follow him the hell and back, but I am not”. Okay I put into nicer words as I am not a monster. I pointed out sweetly two of us getting stuck in the muddy torrent was against common sense, someone would have to pull the other vehicle out. Fortunately, this version worked. I wondered if we should turn back, but the thought of the flood planes we had gone through was daunting and with an explorer’s enthusiasm I thought it could not get worse than this.

The route was to prove me wrong as the dirt suggestions went up the first of 4 mountain passes, and then on a barely discernible path we went down sheer gorges ( the steep drop naturally on the passenger side).

Di was crying in the front car, me I was creating imprints on the bakkie roof and thanking the Gods I had not cancelled our insurance. My comfort was the kids would have enough money to wreck their lives when we assuredly went down the gorge and the vehicles burst into fiery flames to ensure our demise. After a period of intense reflection, I undid my seat belt because I felt being flung out the vehicle would be less painful way to die.

I sparred a thought for the twins’ ancestors- I believe in an afterlife and I had a hard conversation in mind for some people on the other side. On the positive side by hour one, I knew enough about 4x4 parlance to be considered an expert. Boet had to change his 4X4 capabilities manually, because nothing says serious off-road adventurer like a brief roadside pit stop to wrestle with buttons and levers on the wheel shafts. Naturally, this prompted Di to spring into action, exiting the vehicle with the urgency of someone defusing a bomb, cigarette in hand, puffing away as though the fate of the world hinged on her nicotine intake.. The road (if we’re being generous) was endless, a rocky track, with other occasional rocky tracks leading away. The printout map I discarded as completely inadequate. Occasionally there was another rocky track that seemed less like a planned route and more like nature’s abstract art installation. As these other rocky trails branched off, I stared at them wondering, were they whispering false promises of better terrain. Of course, they were likely just as bad, but at that moment, they looked almost... hopeful.

By hour three it was shaping up to be less of a drive and more of an endurance test for vehicles, patience, and possibly lung capacity (Di’s, in particular)

Hunger had set in around hour four. The twins, of course, had inhaled most of the snacks within the first 20 minutes of the trip, leaving us with nothing but one sad bag of dates. “It’s like a cleanse,” my husband said, munching on *my* share. I considered leaving him and his delightful brother to the baboons. At this point we were speeding along at 10 Kilometres per hour on the better part of the track.

Then Boet that fearless crusader of rocky terrain, master of the off-road universe stopped. He got out of his vehicle and looked carefully at it. With some intense reflection he dropped to his knees by the wheel and proceeded to crawl under the vehicle, the dramatic flair of the situation reached new heights. For those blissfully uninitiated in the madness of 4x4 driving, let me enlighten you: crawling under your vehicle mid-drive is the automotive equivalent of a specialist surgeon muttering, “Oops” during an operation. It's never a good sign.

As expected, we, of course, followed the acceptable protocol, bone rattled up and preceded to park behind him. Naturally hubby alighted to chat because nothing says “solidarity” like watching your trail leader disappear under his vehicle. As is common in these cases, he alighted with the swagger of someone who knows *absolutely nothing* about what’s happening but is determined to look knowledgeable. I proudly watched as Hubby sprang into action. That arrogant stance is the man I married a lifetime ago, not for him a bewildered moment of “what the F>>>”!

As the sensible part of our partnership at this point I stayed in the car while wondering if I should start drafting a rescue plan or update our will with at least one addendum. I had read the guide about how many leopards were in the reserve. Someone would have to talk about their sad demise. I felt I filled that role. Di however lit up and smoked all danger away.

I watched with awe at the boys, oblivious to danger, as the two of them stood side-by-side, arms crossed, nodding solemnly at Boet’s tires as if imparting ancient wisdom. Hubby then nodded like they had signed the Genva convention and strode back to our waiting chariot.

It turned out Boet was hearing a rattle after the last cliff we went over, cleverly disguised as a small waterhole. Additionally, it seemed the verdict was the truck, after its impromptu undercarriage inspection, was triumphantly declared fit for duty.

The vehicles started again and the eternal road-trip dilemma continued. Our vehicle was our reluctant dance partner with the terrain, rattling, bouncing, and groaning in protest with every rugged meter. Faced with yet another water-filled road masquerading as a navigable pathway, we were torn between hysterical giggles and the sinking feeling that our adventure was morphing into a survival reality show as we wondered when or if we would ever reach our campsite.

## Welcome to my overpriced wilderness!

Rooihoek campsite gives the promise of premium pricing tantalizingly hinting at pristine maintenance and rustic charm. R413 a night off-season had you dreaming of glamping-level amenities: perhaps quaint ablution blocks that didn’t feel haunted, and fire pits that practically screamed Instagram-worthy.

Instead, reality served up a menu of floodplains and enough 4x4 manoeuvring to qualify for an advanced off-roading masterclass. High and low gear were constant companions, while the road stretched on like a cruel joke and the campsite remained as elusive as Shangri-La.

Finally, after an eternity that could’ve rivalled the plot twists of a six series suspense thriller, the faded sign to Rooihoek emerged like a mirage, giving us assurance we were indeed on the correct path to the other side of the reserve.

Rooihoek was our light at the end of your bone-rattling, kidney-assaulting expedition. We arrived with dreams of flushing toilets and a touch of civilization, only to be greeted by… well, let’s call it rustic charm in its most unapologetically raw form. The "rock-enhanced path to desolation" was nature’s own red carpet, rolled out to welcome us weary travellers with jagged enthusiasm.

And the long drop toilet? Oh, the long drop—a relic from a time when "cleanliness" was more of an optimistic concept than an actual reality. Once pristine, now a poignant memorial to what happens when maintenance takes an extended vacation. Relief turned quickly into resignation as I realized the only thing I was dropping in it was my morale. Welcome to Rooihoek, where the wilderness is the luxury.

In the far distance glinted a river, across an incline populated with snakes, insects, baboons and other delightful health aids. I ever the optimist, now had my cellphone camera posed and ready to immortalize the natural beauty of the wilderness as I took on my Dora the explorer role. Unfortunately, the local insect population saw me as more of a buffet than an artist. As I was dive bombed by mosquitoes the size of small aircraft, my dreams of artistic photographic glory quickly devolved into a battle for survival.

Twenty minutes later I write in my note pad “this camp site is just a collection of scratchy bushes and suspiciously spiky things that seem hell-bent on snagging my clothes and my dignity while I am trying not to pee on my pants, shoes or any other part of my person. Additionally I am being watched by the rudest monkey who mocked me.”

We now discovered that Boet still had a problem with his vehicle. Out came the ground sheet, down went two men under a car, out came the monkeys to raid the toolbox. Guess who was made to go on monkey watch? While I watched the substantial mechanical expertise going on under the car, Di settled herself down with a wordsearch and an ashtray to do serious ash-ing out-her aim to die of smoke inhalation before the next morning.

It was supposed to be an idyllic evening under the stars. The kind of evening that travellers dream of—soft twilight fading into a canopy of stars, the serene hum of nature around you, and the gentle crackle of a campfire providing the perfect backdrop. But no. Nature had other plans, and so did its most mischievous inhabitants. The monkeys were masters of stealth and thievery, swooping in with the precision of seasoned pickpockets. One moment, you’re reaching for your provisions, and the next, they’re vanishing into the treetops, With the little ones triumphantly clutching their stolen prizes. Crackers? Gone. Fruit? Swiped. Not to be outdone, the baboons joined the chaos with all the flair of seasoned theater performers. They set up camp at a safe distance, their curious faces lit with delight as they settled in for the night’s entertainment—*our struggle.* Every fumble, every attempt to salvage a shred of our evening, became part of their dinner-and-a-show experience.

There was more in the show experience. It was the glamorous life of roughing it in the wilderness—where the night becomes an epic showdown between humans and mosquitoes that could double as flying circus acts. Di and I we were into a battleground, armed with our trusty swatting tools and unwavering determination.

Technically then you could say, the evening was ruined by monkeys with pickpocket-level skills and baboons running a dinner theater at our expense while we provided a level of food to the entire sub-Saharan mosquito population. As we hurried through the meal, half-expecting an invoice for the entertainment, we finally looked forward to the real show: the stars. Nature, however, had other plans. Twilight dissolved into a cloudy mess, and then the rumble began.

Thunder? Perhaps. But no, this was the Baviaanskloof—where “rumble” could just as easily mean “local wildlife forming an uprising” or “your digestive system protesting dinner theft.” Then came the lightning—a single, dramatic flash. Surely a fellow camper armed with an industrial flashlight, clumsily navigating the terrain? Or perhaps a bloodthirsty local ready to reclaim the monkeys' loot? Nope. It was actual lightning, and it didn’t stop at mere theatrics. No, it announced the arrival of the mother of all storms, swooping in like nature’s vengeance.

As much as I dreamed of a refreshing shower, the idea of a full-on mud spa wasn’t exactly on my bucket list. So, there I was, sprinting toward my camper like some kind of muddy gazelle, as nature gleefully splashed muck up my legs. Lovely—just the spa treatment I never asked for.

Once safely inside the minute space of the camper, Hubby and I embraced the height of luxury: a bucket wash. Because really, who needs running water when you can awkwardly splash yourself clean with a container that doubles as your laundry hamper? Finally, we climbed onto the bed, damp, exhausted, and mildly smelling of wet earth.

“Goodnight darling” I said “Oh yes and thank you this is the pinnacle of outdoor adventure. Truly, I’m living the dream. “ It was pointless sarcasm. Hubby had taken his hearing aids out and just grinned at me as he gave me a quick kiss and rolled over. He left me with the warzone. These mosquitoes weren't just pests—they were airborne leviathans, buzzing around like miniature helicopters on a mission to ruin the night. Hubby snored beside me while I made the sacrifices in the great mosquito war of the night Sleep was clearly optional,

Now I have the classic approach to disaster management: if you can’t prevent it, overthink it into submission. While Hubby blissfully drifted off into dreamland, I took on the noble, self-appointed role of midnight worrier-in-chief as I fought the good fight against aerial mosquito raids. Every potential calamity played out in my mind like a never-ending disaster film, complete with dramatic soundtrack.

The rivers we had crossed earlier, once appeared treacherous and daunting, now seemed like old friends compared to the new horrors my fertile imagination conjured with the storm raging. "Pleasant," even. In retrospect really, what’s a bit of water when there are storms, lightning, and possibly vengeful mosquitoes to fret about? Each alternative scenario grew wilder, ensuring sleep remained a distant luxury.

I believe in some strange way, my worry may have been the ultimate act of heroism—because surely, by overthinking every potential disaster, I am holding the chaos at bay. Right? Or at least, that’s what I will tell myself in the morning. But another worry was present

The next morning Di and I compared stories of how we spent the night swatting mosquitoes the size of small aircraft and plotting our revenge.

After her first few lung destroyers, what began to confuse me was Di's inexplicable mission to "procure" a rock for her garden—because, apparently, the 87 trillion rocks scattered across the campsite just weren’t *special* enough. After much deliberation (read: aimless wandering with a cigarette), she zeroed in on a hefty chunk of geology that looked like it could double as a small coffee table. This was no pebble; this was a full-blown boulder with ambitions.

With all the determination of someone who’d seen far too many DIY garden makeovers, Di rolled up her sleeves and began the extraction process. Boet, of course, made himself “helpful” by standing nearby, arms crossed, offering expert commentary like, “Are you sure that’ll fit in the car?” and “Looks heavy. Good luck!”

Getting up to the main road (Hehe) I walked- I felt the kids deserved one parent to survive. Also, I needed to video my husband’s demise to prove to insurance that I had no part in it. Insurances are awkward things to negotiate with and I didn’t want them to get sticky about releasing me the funds to recompensate for the cost of a helicopter to fly me out of the hell hole. However, my feeling was on reaching the main drag, that the car was probably cooler than the stifling hell outside. After all it could not get worse, Could it? Those damn Gods!

## The Last Leg of Doom and Potholes

The road now became a master of deception, luring us into a false sense of security with its innocent stretch.

Hubby disengaged the four-wheel drive, and stated , “this isn’t so bad” with a smile in my direction as he grabbed another handful of sweets from my offered tin. He edged the speed up to 15 Kilometres per hour. Just as my sigh of relief escaped, reality hit like a pothole at 180 km/h as we realised the looming hill ahead was not just a hill, but a challenge forged by the questionable creativity of an overly ambitious engineer. No, we did not go around it, but up!

Help was however at hand. There were two concrete strips going up the vertical slope, once intended to be helpful guides for navigating the ascent. Sadly, they now resembled relics from an ancient civilization. Eroded, broken, and buckled, they stood defiantly against logic, daring drivers to “climb” onto them as if auditioning for an off-road stunt competition. It was less of a road and more of an avant-garde obstacle course—a piece of performance art where the medium was sheer frustration and shattered suspension systems.

Staring ahead, I saw not the road but a treacherous illusion crafted by terrain that had clearly given up on being functional. "That's not the road," I said to Hubby, hoping he could remove the vision. Hubby looked at it with a mix of disbelief and despair, as the pathway ahead seemed to morph into a cruel joke—nature’s own parody of infrastructure.

At this point it wasn’t even pretending to be a road anymore, more like a vague suggestion of one: rocks, mud, and a hint of something resembling tire tracks from Boet’s vehicle in the front. The kind of “road” that makes you want to turn around, call for help, and write strongly worded letters to the Minsters and possibly the President—all at once.

WE struggled on and then hit paradise, a flattish area with proteas in full bloom, with a couple of butterflies flitting about as if auditioning for a travel brochure. Truly, it was nature’s way of saying, “See? I can be beautiful when I’m not actively trying to ruin your life.”

But, of course, the romance couldn’t last. Enter the gale-force winds, storming onto the scene like an uninvited guest at a garden party. The butterflies flew backwards while the proteas clung to the earth with all the determination of someone holding onto their hat in a hurricane.

There is a golden rule of travel: what goes up must inevitably lead you down—preferably along a mountain pass that seems to be competing for the title of “Most Terrifying Descent.” The edge into oblivion, tantalizingly close on the passenger side, didn’t so much *invite* as *dare* you to glance over, just to feel that extra spike of adrenaline.

And then bliss, we were on the summit of some mountain where breathtaking views meet the desperate need for a long drop toilet. Naturally, Di had her priorities straight, making sure the cigarette manufacturers didn’t spiral into bankruptcy and used the camper toilet, while I eyed the precarious toilet setup on the side of the mountain like it was auditioning for the role of “least reliable structure ever.”

Perched over a hole that could only generously be called a pit, the wobbling toilet added an extra layer of suspense to the already thrilling mountain pass experience. Balancing carefully—because tipping over was simply *not* an option I finally achieved bladder liberation, a moment of triumph that felt more like parole after years in solitary confinement.

Of course, that victory was short-lived, as the dread of the next few kilometres loomed large. I knew full well that gravity had no mercy, and the road ahead would likely mock my newly found relief with every bump, twist, and vertigo-inducing edge. It did not disappoint.

By the end of the trip, we were muddy, exhausted, and possibly a little traumatized. But hey, we *did* survive, which both twins took as proof of their combined genius. “Another successful adventure!” they declared as we limped back to civilization and cell phone reception.

Successful? Maybe. A good idea? Absolutely not. But hey, what’s life without a little bit of chaos and a whole lot of bad decisions?

## Petal Powered Chaos

I should learn to shut up occasionally. It was sheer stupidity when I said, the rains are plentiful this year, let’s not go to the Kruger but rather let’s do the flowers this year. Hubby beamed “I will get the bakkie ready, and I will talk to my Boet – be good if we get him to join us?”

“Sure!” I replied resignedly, while creating my travelling spreadsheet of all the parks, distances and provisions needed. With only six weeks to plan, I had not a second to lose.

After much planning we agreed that we would meet in Upington. Boet stays in the Western Cape and we in Gauteng so that seemed reasonable and fair.

Just before we left home, Hubby had had a dose in which age brought on the reality of creaky joints. However, Hubby, channelling his inner action hero, shrugged off medical advice with a hearty "I'm good to go!"—a phrase that always seems to foreshadow impending chaos. The chaos Gods do not like to disappoint.

The journey began well enough, a relatively uneventful drive past Kuruman, 558 kilometres from home—a distance that already deserves a gold medal for endurance. Here we camped for the night. Alas, as the morning light crept in, so did the consequences. Hubby woke up moving with the grace and speed of a poorly oiled robot, complete with the occasional wince and groan sound effects for authenticity.

Still, in true stubborn fashion, he proclaimed himself "fine," which of course meant the exact opposite. And so, with me taking the wheel (muttering some creative words under my breath with the back seat driving comments), the adventure continued. Nothing says “road trip success” like achy joints, long drives, and sheer willpower holding everything together. Safe to say, it was shaping up to be a memorable trip, for better or for hilariously worse as we drove the 300 remaining Kilometres to Upington and the great meet up.

With age comes the joys of teamwork in a marriage. Thus, it was on the road we were passing the driving baton to each other just in time for the aches and pains to stage their unwelcome appearance. Hubby, likely feeling like a hero behind the wheel, steered the course toward Upington while my shoulders and neuritis decided to tag along as uninvited passengers.

Upington is a town located in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, nestled along the banks of the Orange River. Upington proudly flaunts its arid charm—think endless dry stretches that make you question whether the clouds even know this place exists. But Upington has a secret, the Orange River. This river steps in like a superhero with a hydration fetish. To the Northern Cape it’s a lifeline of lush greenery and fertile soil. Due to the river the town is a hub for agriculture and is particularly famous for its export-quality grapes, raisins, and wines. For our trip it is a medium sized town on the edge where pastoral charm meets gale-force chaos!

Picture this: we roll into a quaint(bare) campsite by the market grounds, greeted by the scent of horses and that signature "earthy" aroma that’s somehow both nostalgic and mildly unsettling. Hubby, ever the critic with a flair for understated drama, parked the car and crossed his arms in the universal stance of mild dissatisfaction. With a muttered remark about his Boet's timing—likely just enough to sound annoyed but not enough to mask his secret pride in arriving on time—he took stock of the campsite. His assessment? “Barely functional,” delivered with the tone of a man expecting four-star amenities in the wilderness.

As, the ex-farm girl with an eye for rustic charm, the scene unfolded like a postcard from simpler days. What Hubby called “barely functional,” I found endearingly picturesque. Where he saw inadequate facilities, I saw the beauty of a farmyard’s chaos, complete with the kind of authenticity (smell) city folk would pay good money to experience.

This, of course, is the delicate balance of adventure: one person’s annoyance is another’s charming throwback to their roots.

A while passed before Boet made his grand entrance in true dramatic fashion, his camper throwing up enough dust to create a small weather system. He emerged with an air of accomplishment, as if the dust cloud had been part of his grand plan in arriving with flair.

Di wasted no time, gracefully dismounting from the dusty chaos and vanishing in the direction of the ablution block—a move so swift and purposeful it could only mean one thing: it was time for her *secret smoke*. Whether the ablutions passed her inspection remained a mystery, but her stealthy escape spoke volumes. After the obligatory greetings the park was surveyed.

I waited for the complaints, mentally rehearsing apologies for campsite choices to the twins . While I poured out heartfelt concerns about the spartan accommodations, it became apparent I was delivering a soliloquy to the wind. The boys, blessed with laser-sharp priorities, had already clocked the bar across the dusty road, had exchanged a look of mutual understanding, and vanished with the efficiency of men on a mission.

By the time Di and I noticed their absence, they were happily at a bar, had found an old army mate and were now regaling half of Upington with stories of the road while raising their frothy mugs in spirited camaraderie. Whatever grievances the campsite may have inspired were now drowned in laughter, beer, and the cheerful clinking of glasses. Who needs luxury when there’s a bar, right?

And so, with differing perspectives firmly in place, the reasonable price for the campsite was paid and we were ensconced there for two nights. A pleasant afternoon was spent before we walked back, less steady than before, to the waiting campers for supper- naturally this was to have been a braai.

Enter Mother Nature, who had other ideas for our enjoyment and decided to test the structural integrity of everything we owned with wind speeds that could double as a personality test. The braai became a quick meal in a camper as we hurriedly dropped all canvas awnings and retreated in the face of a watery onslaught that put Noah to shame. Did I mention Upington is in the middle of one of the driest regions in the country?

The next morning was delightful but still a little breezy. To the front and centre of this windswept tableau were two grizzled gents. Their humble setup consisted of an ancient tent and a more ancient rusty vehicle which once passed as a small bakkie or truck. Now that mobile relic could double as a motivational billboard, with gospel sayings slapped on every available surface, holding the structure together. Additionally, they had a trailer with a board balanced precariously across it and the pièce de résistance: a tire repurposed into a cooking pot. Because why not?

Ever the explorer, I shimmied over, making a determined detour as I exited the ablutions for the morning. Conversation was exchanged and it turns out these resourceful fellows were bakers on a divine mission to spread the Good Word—one delicious, syrup-drenched koeksuster at a time. They travelled with the custom aerodynamic structure vehicle AKA the rusted and holy bakkie—as their chariot of faith and sugar .Unfortunately this chariot now required substantial work to move any further than where it was parked. Naturally, we became active participants in this holy endeavour by devouring an amount of syrupy dough twists that could only be described as “biblical.” The koeksusters were so good, we might have briefly considered joining the cause just for a lifetime supply. If spreading the gospel tastes like that, sign me up! Naturally Di and her diabetes served as a brake, but an indifferent one at best.

So, there we were, eating our weight in syrup while the wind howled and the horses judged us silently, drinking the wine purchased at the local winery. Such healthy eating and drinking probably helped with the problems that came later.

Our next stop was the SANPark called the Augrabies National park. As seniors we get a healthy 40% discount on weekly stops at certain parks in the South African National Parks or as we call them SAN parks. Hence the need to plan that the twins wandering around complies with such agreeable savings. Side note. Such planning and supervision take work I tell you especially when dealing with such masters of the unnecessary. Herding cats is the nearest vision I can give you.

The Augrabies falls were beyond magnificent as was hubby’s moaning as every joint in his body seemed to ache. Now I have arthritis and from experience I can tell you it's like your immune system decided to throw a surprise party, and the only guests invited are pain, swelling, and a whole lot of sarcasm-worthy moments. However, we were not to know this was such an attack until much later when we returned back home. For now, it was a great unknown when he began the morning with unmistakable stiffness, crying his joints had secretly moonlighted as rusty door hinges. Getting out of bed was a heroic effort worthy of a slow-motion montage, complete with dramatic music. Boet and I thought the worst. Why you ask? Let me draw the picture.

We had experienced the electrifying art of restarting a heart for hubby in the March previously. Now why should life-or-death situations be anything less than *dramatic*? Let me fill in the gaps.

Let’s start with the first scene: the glorious spectacle of hubby tackling a 5 KM run—where ambition meets physiology in a battle that’s truly one for the ages. Picture this: he starts off like a gazelle, full of hope, energy, and what can only be described as misguided enthusiasm. His heart? Oh, it’s *committed*—thumping away like a bass drum at a rock concert, clearly thrilled by the idea of this 5km escapade. His blood pressure, however? A diva in its own right, dramatically deciding, “Nope, not today,” and plunging like a soap opera character fainting for effect.

At first, he’s cruising, all “Look at me, I’m unstoppable!” The crowd cheers, or maybe that’s just the sound of birds mocking him. Then comes the grand finale, and his body starts engaging in what can only be called open rebellion. His heart, now convinced it’s in the final leg of the Olympics, escalates to a pace that suggests it might actually take off and run ahead without him. Meanwhile, his blood pressure throws itself into a nosedive so spectacular it deserves an Olympic gold in gymnastics. Somehow, with sheer stubbornness and possibly a side of existential dread, he crosses the finish line. Triumphant, but only just, wobbling like a top that’s about to tip over.

Post run he’s a one-man cautionary tale—a study in contrasts. The heart’s going, “Yes! More! Faster!” while the rest of his system is screaming, “Sit down, you maniac!”

And the aftermath? Oh, that’s where the real drama unfolds. He spends the next hour looking like he’s auditioning for a medical soap opera as we rush off to hospital. Enter the hero—armed with needles, nerves of steel, and hopefully a medical degree (but hey, minor details, right?). After restarting said cardiac vessel he is wheeled to the cardiac intensive care unit where with true wifely compassion I casually remind my beloved that a brisk walk wouldn’t have come with the added bonus of a cardiac melodrama. But for hubby, nothing says “weekend warrior” quite like high heart rates, plummeting blood pressure, and enough sweat to fill a small kiddie pool! Truly, he is an inspiration to us all. Or maybe just a cautionary tale.

Back to the Augrabies Falls national park and hubby trying to alight out the camper. A delightful mix of limping, moaning and shuffling, looking like a cross between Frankenstein's monster and a poorly oiled robot. He climbs stairs like they have become his Everest. Climbing down it seemed like he was testing for booby traps.

Me, I am frantic phoning our medical experts who are writing scrolls of email prescriptions. Di recommends turmeric infusions and positive thoughts. Boet is gunning his camper motor to drive his elder(by two minutes) back to the tender medical care of Upington.

I am doing my best massage techniques on his legs and arms when we welcome the heroine of our drama- our youngest daughter, who happens to be a chiropractor. Calmly she listens to the hysteria on the frantic phone call. “It sounds like an arthritis flair.” She says with the calm determination of someone who's just discovered a conspiracy theory and is determined to use cancel culture.

“Mom, did you bother checking his sacroiliac joint?”

Pause in drama- I check the poor SI joint. Realize why we went for broke for the education of said child.

So, what is the SI joint you may ask. Happy to oblige. It’s that joint which tirelessly connects the sacrum (aka that awkwardly shaped bone that thinks it's too cool for the spine) to the ilium (the pelvis’s overachieving member), In hubby’s case also the bone he hurt on a male bonding exercise AKA a caravan rally, a booze-fueled cart race, and the brilliant decision to forgo brakes entirely. Although Hubby’s bone-breaking escapade might( to some men) sound like the stuff of legends it is in reality a cautionary tale for anyone considering mixing speed, gravity, and liquid courage. What it was is a hill, a cart, and a group of adult men proving that age does not, in fact, guarantee wisdom.

Back to the SI joint. This marvelous anatomical gem is responsible for hauling all those snacks you eat off the couch and transferring your body weight—without so much as a thank you card. Stability? Flexibility? It provides both, and what does it get in return? Not a single mention in Hollywood medical dramas or casual dinner table conversations. Truly tragic!

Now like a three-year-old throwing a tantrum said joint is in open revolt as it feels it has already endured enough neglect in its lifetime.

Drama restart as I now do the recommended actions sent via trusty YouTube. Pain relief begins immediately and goes to a six out of ten from twenty. No big deal. Just another day in the world of adrenaline-fueled miracles as he reaches for his next beer to take a heavy-duty schedule 5 painkiller in order to damage his kidneys.

Moral of the story have your chiropractor on call as well as the rest of the medical fraternity.

Since hubby is now just gently groaning occasionally, Boet and hubby have both decided we can continue to go to Springbok where if needed medical professionals can help with the problem. Springbok is a small town located in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, nestled in the heart of the Namaqualand region.

Thus, we continue to Springbok.

I’m at the wheel looking forward to getting some mighty painkillers for the achy breaky backseat driver next to me. Obviously, his schedule 5 bombs just were not doing as good a job of removing pain and sending him to sleep as they were at destroying his kidney function and my confidence as a driver. I wish they made painkillers that stopped critical analysis.

So, fueled by critical comments and diesel we arrive in Springbok.

Springbok is a charming escapade filled with flowers, frostbite, and questionable packing choices. The blooms were indeed delightful, a vibrant display of nature's artistry, but Mother Nature herself was in full-on "Arctic Overlord" mode. Naturally, hubby, in a stunning act of weather-denial, had conveniently left his warm clothes at home. Because who needs a jacket when there are flowers to admire? Priorities, right?

Springbok is also one of those small towns that truly understands life’s balance. On one hand, you have the pharmacy, clearly the epicentre of South Africa’s collective ailments, judging by the snake-like line of sniffly, achy, and possibly overly dramatic individuals waiting for their dose of salvation in pill form. Perhaps it’s the arctic winds that conspired to make Springbok the unofficial capital of coughs and creaks.

But fear not, for Springbok also holds the antidote to all woes: wine! Because, really, why wait for prescribed medication when you can self-medicate with a nice Merlot? Feeling miserable? Sip. Stiff joints? Sip. Overwhelmed by the sheer misery emanating from the pharmacy queue? Sip. The sickest people in South Africa met the most enthusiastic wine enthusiasts in the same town. Springbok: where one bottle can cure what medicine can’t—or at least make you forget about it! I enthusiastically acquired a few litres.

I must mention the weather. Boet, was so cold he actually wore long pants—a feat so rare it might have made the local news. Long pants! In Boet's world, this is akin to a total wardrobe revolution, something only achieved under extreme duress or sub-zero temperatures.

Side bar: I feel I must fill you in about the fun in Arthritis. Spoiler alert there is none! The moment the temperature drops, arthritis wakes up like it’s got a personal vendetta against your joints. Suddenly, every knuckle feels like it’s auditioning for a role in *Titanic,* recreating the ice-cold drama of Jack’s last moments in freezing waters. Your knees, elbows, and fingers are all locked in a battle against nature, creaking and groaning louder than an old wooden chair.

And don’t even think about trying to bundle up for warmth—by the time you’ve layered up enough to fight the cold, your limited mobility makes you look like a Michelin Man trying to perform yoga. Meanwhile, the chilly air doesn’t just nibble at your bones; it throws a full-blown tantrum, leaving your body questioning why it’s signed up for this seasonal torture.

Now you understand arthritis and cold pity the long-suffering wife, whose foresight deserves a medal. She graciously loans her coat to hubby, because let’s face it, he looked one shiver away from icicle status and I am still feeling sympathetic with the arthritis pain he still has. Remember arthritis loves cold. Meanwhile, I resigned myself to the ultimate fashion statement, an Abdominal Snowman ensemble. Practical, yes. Stylish? Let’s call it "a bold creative choice." But hey, when you’ve got to choose between looking like a Michelin mascot or freezing solid, and your arthritis is knocking at the door, vanity takes a backseat.

So, there you have it: a journey of floral wonders, arctic winds, hubby in a ladies padded jacket and a wardrobe saga for the ages. At least the flowers didn’t seem to mind the frosty audience or the fashion lack! Truly a tale of survival—Springbok style.

Hubby now started appearing now more like his normal self after a schedule 1 medication did what schedule 5 couldn’t. I think it was a whole lot of tender loving care from said wife that made the change. It seemed right now to take some time to explore the environment. Hondeklipbaai was decided on.

Boet, ever the adventurer, decided we should “take the scenic route.” Scenic, as it turns out is 115 km of a dirt suggestion of a road. No problem for our 4x4 camper, but possibly not the best for a Fiat Ducato.

Me, I suggest phoning ahead for accommodation before leaving the salubrious but plague-ridden Springbok. I am laughed at, after all who their right mind would want to come to the desert to view flowers?

Five gruelling hours later—five, count them—we emerge victorious from the treacherous mud obstacle course that some optimists might call a road. One hundred and ten glorious kilometres of brown sludge artistry later, we arrive to discover a plot twist: half the population of the southern hemisphere had the same bright idea and is currently clogging every nook, cranny, and camping spot at our destination. The alternative dirt road, which we could have taken (if Boet had not decided on the first option) is clearly maintained for weekend warriors, foreign faces and motorbikes by their gazillions.

Tired and a little ratty from lack of food we stalk the huddle of shacks, houses and tastefully created fishing shacks. Cue the Biblical reaction. No room at the inn, the guest house, the campsite, or even a suspiciously overpriced hammock rental. Alas, we are no Joseph and Mary, and there’s no manger in sight—unless you count the backseat of our car. While the wind channels its inner Beyoncé and auditions for an interpretive dance role, we gather for a group conflab about where, exactly, we’re supposed to sleep. The options: slim to none.

Then, catastrophe strikes: a rogue gust of wind snatches my map straight from my hand, sending it on a joyride. Before I can mourn its loss, two feral children pounce on it like lions taking down a wildebeest. They grip it with white-knuckled determination, shouting “MINE!” in stereo. I briefly entertain the idea of wrestling them for it but decide against it because, let’s be honest, children are basically chaos in human form, and I’d rather not risk it. Besides, they have the advantage—they seem to survive on sugar and audacity alone.

Desolate I try and rely on my ever so imperfect memories.

We came through a SAN park.” I mention. “Should we go there and see if there is a camp site?” Silence ensues. I would love to say they are considering the idea, but experience has shown I must operate like a seed and let it take a while to germinate in the fertile male minds.

Two minutes later Boet says-“ Should we try the SAN park we came through?”

“ Brilliant idea!” I state sarcastically “ Why don’t we do that?”

Loading ourselves into the vehicles we wind our way out of the salubrious Hondeklipbaai following Boet who is enthusiastically trying to find a SAN Park gate with the enthusiasm of a Formula One racer who’s taken a wrong turn into the Sahara. His breakneck speed ensured that our lungs got a generous coating of fine dust—souvenirs, courtesy of the terrain. Finally, as if emerging from witness protection, a modest little gate peeked shyly from the bushes. Behind it stood an official-looking gentleman, minus most his teeth, casually cooking his haute cuisine lunch, as he guarded the gate like a rottweiler. Casual conversation elects that he indeed has an idea of where there may be a vacant camp site.

With the aura of someone who was about to solve all the world’s problems—or at least the chaos surrounding our current predicament—he strode purposefully into the building. The structure itself was clearly an ode to multitasking, doubling as his office and a culinary nerve centre. The walls whispered tales of hastily scratched notes and strong coffee, setting the tone for what was to come.

I followed, watching as he plunged into an almost ceremonial search, unearthing an ancient ledger that looked like it had seen more action than the bakkie's problematic wheel. With a pen in hand and an air of solemnity, he painstakingly began recording our names and vehicle details into the book, each letter carved into the page as if engraving his magnum opus. Honestly, the whole process felt as though we were being inducted into some secret society, except the only reward would be relief from logistical headaches.

Then came the grand reveal: the Nedbank card machine. It was presented with a flourish, like the answer to all our prayers. For a brief, hopeful moment, it seemed like things might actually go smoothly. But, as fate would have it, there was no signal—because why would the universe let a single thing about this journey be easy?

In the face of this technological betrayal, we did what any desperate travellers would do: we dug through every pocket, wallet, and forgotten crevice of our bags and cars in search of cash. It was a mad scramble, punctuated by the kind of sighs and muttered curses that come only from having far too many "adventures" in one trip. Finally, we gathered the necessary amount and handed it over with the reverence of subjects offering tribute to a king.

He accepted the cash as solemnly as we gave it, completing the transaction like a sacred ritual. As we stepped back outside, I couldn't help but marvel at the absurdity of it all. Bureaucratic survival in the wild truly is its own kind of art form. However, as yet he had further wisdom to bestow on us.

With the gravitas of someone delivering Shakespearean wisdom in broken English laced with an Afrikaans flair and a lisp, the gentleman replied, “Not far… but don’t go past the camp, you will get stuck with that vehicle,” throwing a dismissive wave at the Fiat with the precision of an Olympic fencer. He then pointed approvingly at our sturdier vehicle—as if awarding us a participation trophy in the “Survival of the Fittest Cars” contest. His words were punctuated by infectious giggles that felt both supportive and slightly menacing.

As my imagination conjured visions of tow trucks and roadside heroics, I whipped out my phone to search for recovery vehicle strategies. Alas, two minutes later, the internet decided it needed a vacation too. Resigned to the impending chaos, I braced myself for yet another entry in the saga we now affectionately call “Boet’s Holiday Expeditions: The Survival Chronicles.”

One of SANParks admirable maps had been on the table. Now I must tell you about the SANParks map—a masterpiece of cartographic confusion, seemingly designed by five-year-olds armed with crayons and a vague sense of mischief. It’s less a map and more a cryptic puzzle, devoid of any directional clues, but still, I clutched it in my sweaty paw like it was the Shroud of Turin, hoping against hope that this one might break the curse of its predecessors. Spoiler alert: it didn’t.

Meanwhile, the males in our family, fuelled by blind optimism and a complete disregard for navigation, roared off into the wilderness without so much as a glance at my sacred scroll. The twins, naturally, were in their element, treating the dirt track like their personal rally course. Ahead, a small Land Rover appeared—a beacon of hope, surely. Within moments, it turned off, leaving us with a critical realization: All our superb negotiating skills had neglected to ask the name of the camp we were supposed to stay at. From such minor details sprouts female despair.

As the Land Rover disappeared into the horizon, I suggested, with the enthusiasm of a dummy in an animated film, that we follow it. After all, it looked confident, purposeful even. My fellow travellers, however, dismissed the idea with the kind of airy wave reserved for swatting flies. “He’s probably gone to the cave,” my ever-supportive hubby declared, waving dismissively. “We want to settle down and have lunch.” Because, clearly, lunch takes precedence over trivial matters like finding our destination. With a longing glance at the Landrover roaring off into the distance, I state the increasingly pressurised situation I have been lovingly considering since leaving the metropolis of Hondeklipbaai.

“I need the loo,” I announced for the fourth time, my voice tinged with desperation.

“No problem, love,” came the indifferent male response, as though my bladder was a minor inconvenience rather than a ticking time bomb. My water, however, strongly disagreed, signalling its urgent need for a suitable orifice to sit on. Every bump in the road added to my uterine discomfort, transforming the journey into a cruel endurance test.

Finally, buildings appeared in the distance—a triumphant moment, or so we thought. The two vehicles turned eagerly, only to discover that the buildings were locked and deserted. My water cried out in despair, and my ever-loving spouse offered his usual brand of comfort: “We are nearly there, love. It’s probably a bit further on.”

The twins, ever the navigational experts, held a conflab and confidently chose the wrong direction. A few minutes later, they admitted they were lost.

Di, in a moment of practicality, kicked her beloved out of the Fiat to use the on-board amenities, while I, now practically swimming in my own fluids, stared longingly at the camper toilet—an inaccessible luxury unless fully set up. Around me, the land stretched endlessly, mocking me with its lack of bushes. Truly, this was shaping up to be another unforgettable chapter in the saga of SANParks adventures.

As usual the statement "a bit lost" is family code for disaster. This ‘Bit lost” was code for "let's see if we can truly merge man, machine, and sand into one inseparable entity." Yup there sinks the Fiat majestically into a sea of sand. No half measures here, it was properly wedged in the sand while the twins, in their infinite wisdom, masquerade as seasoned off-road experts. A period of intense debate ensued with no clear winner but plenty of volume. Meanwhile, I, the voice of reason in a sea of lunacy, suggested we use the levelling chocks—those trusty gadgets designed for a cozy level camper setup. Magical items to ensure sleeping was not done fighting gravity in a vehicle. Hail the chocs, now repurposed as our Hail Mary.

What followed could only be described as a masterclass in efficiency. The twins sprang into action, their "efficiency" leaving Di chain-smoking through a week's worth of her tar supplies while she mulled over the merits of walking versus braving the camper’s sauna of despair. With all the brilliance of slapstick engineers, the boys attached a tow rope, revved the bakkie engine to its absolute maximum, and triumphantly embedded the Fiat even deeper into the sand. Progress? Not so much.

Enter my beloved with his belated epiphany about the chocks (you’re welcome), and voilà—both vehicles were finally freed from their sandy prison. Cue the twins' realization, complete with synchronized head nods, that we might have strayed too far into the park. Perhaps the endless dunes of sand had tipped them off. But no worries—I enhanced our retreat with an interpretive dance of bladder-induced urgency to ensure we returned to the very spot where we waved farewell to the Land Rover.

And, lo and behold, the Land Rover did know where it was going! We were greeted by the glorious sight of fellow adventurers and—wait for it—two long-drop toilets. Bliss! I made a desperate beeline to the facilities, which, in a stroke of rural security genius, were locked with a shell tied to a piece of rope hung on a nail across the door. For added charm, the male and female signs dangled on the outside, making it perfectly clear that equality truly reigns in the bush.

Relief washed over me—momentarily, that is—until we discovered the pièce de résistance: there was no water on site. A brief, frantic audit of our water supplies revealed five litres from Boet, two from us, and a bit in the flush tanks in the vehicles two onboard toilets. The solution was as divine as it was obvious. Beer for water, because hydration is overrated when cold alcohol beckons from the fridge. Fortunately, for our madcap attempt at survival camping, not only does home-made beer help hydrate the unprepared but also proves to be a bargaining chip for five litres of aqua from a better-prepared camper, who felt we had given them beer and a show.

And so, surrounded by breathtaking scenery, the waves crashing poetically against the shore, we sat—dirty, dusty, and perilously low on dignity—but undeniably content. Survival had never looked so stylish.

## Nieuwoudtville Nights: Power Outages, Baked Beans, and Camping Chaos

Nieuwoudtville is a charming town located in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. It lies on the Bokkeveld Plateau, where the Cape Fynbos meets the Hantam Karoo, Boesmanland, and the Knersvlakte. As a devoted (some may say *obsessed*) ethno-botanist hobbyist, I had long yearned to visit the sacred grounds of Niewoudtville—a place where bulbs reign supreme, and flora fanatics like me go to find meaning in life. After some persuasive pleading and promises to avoid any plant-related monologues during the trip (a promise I had no intention of keeping), the group finally agreed to journey to the illustrious “Bulb Capital of the World.”

The weather was in on the plan, offering a tantalizing hint of spring-like cold-a deceptive niceness that would soon unravel. Our two vehicles behaved as though possessed by the spirit of cooperation, there were no flashing red lights, and the passengers were all getting on well. It was suspicious. Too good to last. Then came ‘The Mountain.’ A tarred road riddled with potholes so colossal that I began to wonder if there was an ogre in the mountain attempting to swallow us whole.

At last, we reached the top of the world like champions who had conquered some bizarre pothole-filled gladiator arena. My phone rang, and the campsite I had so diligently booked informed me with alarming cheeriness that they were overbooked. But fear not! They had kindly arranged for us to stay at a friend's place—for the same price, of course. (You could practically hear the words “What a bargain!” echoing in the subtext). I informed the group and said I would phone the said friend and check the new campsite out.

After a quick online search, I found the guest house with the same name listed but not the campsite. It was rated as cute and cottagey. Therefore, I called this mysterious friend’s campsite on the phone number provided by the first campsite, where a lovely woman confirmed the arrangement. Her soothing voice convinced me that this wasn’t a disaster but a quirky detour. Little did I know.

As we rolled into the charmingly pint-sized town of Niewoudtville, we realized the town was a misnomer. To call it a town was like calling a puddle the Atlantic Ocean. Still, I couldn’t help but be enchanted by the endless fields of flowers. It was as if the plants themselves were putting on a display just for me, whispering, “It’s all worth it, isn’t it?” In that moment, standing amidst nature’s floral fireworks, I almost believed them. Almost. I’d have to wait and see what other surprises Niewoudtville had in store first.

Since it was lunch time, we decided to find our home for the next two nights. We were looking forward to settling in, pulling out the chairs and having a pleasant lunch and chilling out, before a quick tour around the area. Our Garmin led us to the end of a decidedly un-friendly road and at the very last house we saw the labeled field, behind a small gate. We opened it an were immediately welcomed by a lovely hound who had boundless joy and very little sense of direction or fear of a car. The field was bear with a caravan parked next to the small stone built abolition block. Of humans there were no signs.

We had dreams of crackling campfires and idyllic serenity filling our heads, obviously this was not to be. Our arrival at the campsite was unheralded, so we settled into the field and did a quick check of the ablutions which were unisex and cutesy. The weather had become blustery and cold, so after a quick sandwich, some of which went to the dog, we decided to go on the drive and come back early, with the promise we would make a nice pot of curry for the evening meal.

On our return we found life was indeed present other than the dog. Fresh from our bumpy safari across roads so cratered they could double as lunar landscapes, —we saw next door in the guest house, a man whose aura screamed “Campsite overlord. This overlord stood on the neighboring property like the emperor of all things mediocre, surrounded by a legion of bicycles in varying states of despair. The man exuded the kind of energy that says, "I don't just own this place, I *am* this place."

As the men wrestled with poles and canvas of the gazebo, Di and I approached His Majesty. Armed with her impeccable private school English accent, Di introduced us with the kind of refined charm that could make tea drinkers everywhere nod in approval and that could charm a royal corgi. It was a moment as sparkling as the mud puddles beneath her leather boots. And then—oh, then—the transformation began. His pocked face morphed into a feline grin so smug it could have powered a small town, and his heavily accented English poured forth like treacle over thorns.

Forget the friendly price we were promised. Apparently, the bargain price that had been dangled before us like the Holy Grail was now reserved for fairy tales and unicorns. Nay, we were now expected to part with far more than the money we had been told. I switched to Afrikaans with the realization we had met some one who believed the English were concentration camp keepers. To no avail R350 for our vehicle for the joys of tripping over glorified cow pasture.My Afrikaans had reduced our price, but Di’s perfectly measured English would result in the coup d ’grace a staggering R450 for Boet’s Fiat Camper. This was now a luxury experience if ever there was one! Apparently Boest solar run camper would use more electricity than our solar powered one.

Naturally, I asked to speak to the woman—the architect of this fantastical fairy tale of affordability. But alas, with a Machiavellianflourish that would shame any worthy villain, the man dismissed her as though she were a mere extra in the grand drama of his life. It was then I realized we were in the presence of a particular breed of man: the " rabid Manthropology Caveman”. You know the type—a legend in their own mind, firmly believing women are but decorative props in the grand stage production of masculinity.

“Not her property, *mine!*” he declared in Afrikaans with the gusto of someone who had just uncovered a game-changing plot twist. I half-expected a thunderclap and dramatic music to underscore his delivery. And then, as if auditioning for a tragic monologue, he launched into his tale of woe: a pitiful soul so wounded, cast into the desolation of... *overflow camping*. Oh, the injustice! The cruel, unimaginable torment of being relegated to the wilderness of second-tier camping needs.

Yes, apparently, we’d stumbled into his personal revenge epic—a man scorned by being relegated to "overflow camping," the cruelest of fates in his twisted narrative.

As the rain dripped melodramatically off the edge of the newly erected gazebo, I gathered the males of our party for a strategy meeting—our very own council of war. With wet hair plastered to foreheads and gazes fixed somewhere between despair and determination, we plotted our escape from the wrath of the self-appointed overlord of this soggy plot of land.

"Option one," I declared, channelling my inner action movie hero, "we plead for mercy at neighbouring campsites, grovelling for scraps of dry ground." Murmurs rippled through the group, though the idea of adding *humiliation* to our already sodden predicament didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

"Option two," I continued, "we make a bold stand. Camp... on the *road.*" This prompted a chorus of raised eyebrows and scoffs, mostly because camping on the road sounded like an excellent way to become speed bumps in someone else’s holiday saga.

"And lastly," I delivered the pièce de résistance, "we retreat back down the tortuous pass—the same one that turned half of our party green this morning—back to square one." Collective groans erupted; and we stared dramatically into the rain as if the mere thought had crushed our souls.

Yet amidst this brainstorm session of brilliance, our landlord—his ego inflated larger than the camping fees—decided to throw a plot twist into the mix. "You can leave, but not before paying what you owe.

I looked at him incredulously, wondering if he realized we weren’t operating under feudal law. Then, after a brief but intense debate about currency conversion rates for metaphorical flesh payments, we begrudgingly handed over what felt like a ransom for his muddy dominion and decided on option one to three for the next day.

With the field fast becoming a tableau of mud, a marsh that got us to wonder if we would be able to move the next morning, we decided since we were paying for electricity we would use it.

But the electricity was the silent, malevolent , temperamental diva of our camping adventure. It couldn’t merely provide power like a sensible utility; no, it had aspirations. It was dramatic, unpredictable, and could easily moonlight as an angsty teen scribbling poems about its struggles in the dark. By the third failed attempt to heat water in the microwave (which, by the way, apparently has the audacity to *require power*), the park's electrical grid threw its final tantrum, and so began our descent into chaos.

Boet, ever the champion of the cause, marched off to confront our landlord with the determination of a general rallying the troops. Cue the fireworks! A heated argument broke out, during which Boet was accused—wrongly, of course—of operating a clandestine heater empire. Because why settle for microwaves when you can smuggle in a whole HVAC system, right? Hubby then chimed in with his own brand of diplomacy, casually offering to "help the landlord see reason manually," which, definitely felt more like a threat than an olive branch.

Things escalated quickly. Suddenly, we were no longer weary campers battling faulty wiring; we were suspects in a sabotage plot worthy of a James Bond film. Who needs espionage when you can overthrow power grids with microwaves and baked beans? While the landlord added "accusers-in-chief" to our deteriorating résumé, we decided survival was the best revenge. Enter the trusty gas stoves, those humble heroes of culinary crises.

As the stove hissed softly, we cooked the ever-dramatic baked beans—because naturally, a proper camping tragedy ends with canned goods—and finally managed to heat water for warm drinks. At this point, we resembled Arctic explorers more than vacationers, clutching mugs like lifelines while quietly praying the males in our party wouldn’t explode from sheer frustration. Camping, they said, would be fun. *Fun!*

The best however was yet to come.

The next morning greeted us with a frost so severe it could have frozen a sneeze mid-air. Heavy clouds loomed menacingly overhead, clearly conspiring to punish anyone audacious enough to try and see *the flowers*. And, oh, the flowers—nature’s prima donnas—had decided they were too cold to make an appearance. Who could blame them, really? If I could shut down like that, I would too.

Determined to salvage some semblance of civilization, I made a beeline for the unisex bathroom, hoping for a bit of warmth and hygiene. Alas, the building had become a fortress, occupied by the other camping family who had apparently decided to colonize both showers *and* toilets for eternity. I stood there, grumbling in the bitter cold, counting the seconds until someone emerged.

When a woman finally exited the shower, her face carried an expression that can only be described as a mix of pity and regret. “Good luck,” she said ominously, as if warning me about a curse. “It only works at the geyser itself. Ignore the tap.” Cryptic advice from the camping oracle.

It turned out, deciphering her words was like unlocking an escape room, but with less fun and more frostbite. Apparently, the shower demanded an intricate dance: you had to leave the freezing spray behind, operate the geyser with Olympic precision, and then sprint back to the spray over a floor colder than the ice palace in Siberia. This had to be done *while ensuring nothing you owned was near enough to get drenched.* It was a logistical nightmare. By the time I cracked the code, I felt like I had earned a degree in Survival Plumbing.

And the shower? Well, describing it as “ warming” would be like calling a rabid crocodile “a lovely cuddle companion.” I left wetter, colder, and considerably less amused,. thinking about adding the campsite owner to a list of the most unwanted horrible people in the world.Hubby managed to come in next and then Di and Boet.

I simply *must* pause here to highlight Di’s undeniable prowess—or rather, *lack thereof*—in the realm of mechanics and technology. To call her expertise “minimal” would be charitable; Di’s interactions with anything more complex than a toaster are an event unto themselves. Watching her troubleshoot is a masterclass in unintentional comedy, complete with sighs of exasperation and what I can only describe as “button-pushing roulette.”

Mechanical marvels tremble in her presence, knowing full well they’ll either malfunction spectacularly or require an expensive replacement by the time she’s done. Di doesn’t *use* technology—she battles it.

The shower was something that needed a high degree of manipulation as well as fleet of foot to get down of the shower platform itself- race to the gas geyser and ensure it worked before dodging the scalding steam and manipulating the cold tap to the degree that allowed the geyser to continue working. Too much cold and pouf off went the geyser, not enough cold and third degree burns.

It was no surprise when she returned as an icicle with bad temper. Without coffee due to the electricity and without further ado she announced we were leaving now.

I had by this time phoned and arranged alternative accommodation , with the camp owner stating we would be cramped but a plan would be made for us in town.

In a mad rush, the frozen, soggy gazebo was unceremoniously crammed into the camper, as if the sheer force of frustration could make it fit better. We braced ourselves to escape the swampy disaster we had called home the last night, only for the universe to deliver one final punchline: illumination, quite literally. The electrical problem revealed itself like a dramatic plot twist—Boet’s camper connection was not just damp, but having a full-on pool party, courtesy of the field’s stellar drainage (or lack thereof).

Within minutes, we rolled into the town camping site like weary adventurers seeking refuge from the swampy battlefield we left behind. The “drier ground” was more a relative term than a promise, but at least it didn’t squelch underfoot. The site, however, was cramped—imagine sardines in a tin, but with campers and questionable parking skills. A couple of fellow campers stared us down, clearly horrified that our arrival might block their precious exits, as if we were plotting to strand them there for eternity.

But then came the magic of storytelling. Once we unfolded our tragic saga of frozen gazebos, muddy escapes, and electrified chaos, their stern faces softened. With a few chuckles (and probably a heavy dose of pity), they kindly maneuvered around us, shaking their heads and laughing at our tales of misadventure. We were an unintentional comedy act, and at least for them, we delivered. Bravo to us, the campsite entertainers!

Without even pretending to be proper campers, we abandoned all notions of outdoor leisure and bee-lined straight into the pub—a sanctuary of warmth, cheesy pizza, and caffeine salvation. The big kettle fireplace crackled away, radiating the kind of heat that felt like a hug from the universe itself. We unwound in dramatic fashion, clutching our warm coffee mugs like they were life preservers in an ocean of cold, exhaustion, and general chaos. Forget camp chairs, forget flowers—this was the real haven we’d been searching for.

## Nope No Problems Here

Kruger Park is an iconic South African gem. For most, a dreamy safari escape; for Boet and his long-suffering, driving-averse spouse, Di, it’s a recurring ordeal disguised as “quality time.” Of course, when you’re a casual 1 400 kilometres away, what else is there to do but buckle up and join the madness? Naturally since we are around 400 kms from the park we join in on the fun. After all, nothing says “relaxing family getaway” like heated debates over GPS directions and roadside existential crises.

Typically, Kruger adventures are routine—if you can call elephants thundering toward you like they have unpaid grievances, or snakes claiming squatters' rights in the bathroom “routine.” The usual, right? But there was one year that stood out—worthy of an official chapter in the ever-chaotic saga of “Travels with Boet.” It was the year we dared to do the impossible: to hunt for the elusive wild dogs, nature’s version of a gang of teenagers with too much caffeine and on tic.

The atmosphere was tinged with hysteria before we even left. Boet and Hubby, ever the optimists, were hyped up the trip as though wild dogs were just waiting at the park gates to sign autographs for them. Boet’s long suffering spouse, meanwhile, bewailed every kilometre of road ahead like an opera singer dealing with a Romeo and Juliet death scene. I oscillated between faint hope and the grim realization that spotting these dogs might be less "epic nature moment" and more "gruelling game of hide-and-seek in blistering heat."

But off we went, fuelled by snacks, questionable optimism. Wild dogs, we were coming for you—whether you liked it or not.

The trip started off innocently enough, as these tales always do. A leisurely stop at Aluzoo, where I engaged in my favourite pastime of mooning over rhinos who, unlike me, seemed blissfully unaware of life's chaos as they lumbered along chomping their favourite meal of vegetation. The black spec in the distance and impalas meandered peacefully minding their own business as we debated if the spec was a magnificent sable or simply another Gnu. With a steaming cup of coffee in hand and cars miraculously behaving themselves, we cruised past roadblocks and orange groves as the best version of a feel-good road trip movie. Snacks, of course, were abundant—because fainting from hunger on a five-hour journey would simply be too dramatic, even for us.

Fuelled by unhealthy chomping we arrived at our stop, Ngwenya, a time share resort on the edge of the Kruger Park, sitting innocuously on the crocodile river, which is aptly named for the wildlife. Even Di was ready to bask in a week of luxury, while we freeloaded at the richer sibling’s timeshare. Ngwenya, is a selection of faux-thatch units that scream “rustic chic” and a restaurant so indifferent that its food seemed to say, “Weight loss? Consider it handled.”

Di, ever the eco-warrior, wasted no time dumping her clothes in her room and diving headfirst into her noble quest to fill the air with a robust cloud of tobacco rich puff pollution. Meanwhile, we unpacked with the precision of seasoned travellers—or a circus troupe—and cracked open the beer. Channelling Mrs. Beeton’s guide to wifely perfection, I sipped a shandy and complimented the brewers with all the enthusiasm required to keep marital bliss and brotherly love intact.

The wildlife seemed to sense our arrival. Elephants strolled majestically to say hello, hippos grunted their approval, and crocodiles lounged like sunbathing celebrities—all conveniently meters away by the river. “Ah,” I thought, inhaling the tobacco smoke-infused air requiring me to take a puff from my asthma pump, “what a beautiful life it is in this country.”

Naturally, this was the precise moment the Gods decided it was time for chaos. After all, no good story stays peaceful for long.

Following an early night spent stuffing ourselves with dinner—only mildly singed on the braai—we collapsed into bed, replete and blissfully unaware of the havoc looming on the horizon. For in Ngwena, even faux-thatch units and elephantine antics cannot protect you from the inevitable truth: the Gods were bored, and we were their entertainment.

The next morning, we woke up abruptly with a cacophony of Egyptian Geese. Our discovery was to find the weather had also come to Ngwena. The storm clearly was studying to become a hurricane. Birds were flying backwards and Egyptian geese had set up a complaints desk outside our chalet.

“It seems like it’s raining today.” Screamed hubby above the noise. I may have mentioned hubby is very observant but suffers from the delusion no one else is as observant. I swallowed the “no kidding !” retort and nodded in agreement instead.

The rain hammered against the windows with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for apocalyptic movies. The patio where smoking was permitted resembled a small tsunami, poor Di, in full nicotine withdrawal, decided the best way to cope was to immerse herself in a cinematic bloodbath.

In her film choice chainsaws were wielded with all the grace of a toddler let loose in a hardware store. Within five minutes of blood-soaked chaos, I decided to retreat to our room, clutching my book like a shield against the auditory assault. But alas, fate had other plans. Both our room and Di’s were strategically positioned to ensure that the lounge’s symphony of chainsaw screams would infiltrate every corner, obliterating any hope of a peaceful read.

Hubby, ever the optimist, joined me with the naive belief that the howling gale outside might drown out the cinematic carnage. Instead, the storm and the movie seemed to strike up an unholy duet, creating a surround-sound experience so immersive it felt like we were trapped inside the horror film itself. As I sat there questioning every decision that had led to this moment, one thing became clear: this was not just a day to remember—it was a day to regret.

Now, both the boys and I carry the charming baggage of some post-traumatic stress syndrome—because nothing says “character building” like a war or two. The boys, barely out of their teenage years, were thrust into the chaos of Operation Savannah, where their biggest concern went from acne to artillery overnight. Meanwhile, I had the distinct privilege of growing up in Rhodesia during the height of the so-called “terrorist war,” which was less of a war and more of a never-ending blood soaked nightmare with a side of political turmoil.

The boys’ stories are filled with the kind of gritty, harrowing details that make you wonder how anyone survives being 18, let alone 18 in a war zone. My own memories are a delightful cocktail of curfews, bloodied and burnt homesteads, whispered fears, and the constant hum of tension that made even the most mundane tasks on a farm feel like a covert operation. Together, we’ve got enough war stories to fill a library—and enough dark humour to keep us laughing through the absurdity of it all.

In my particular case, screaming is like an unwanted time machine—instantly transporting me back in 4D to the chaos, complete with surround sound and emotional flashbacks for the full immersive experience. It's a front-row seat to memories nobody asked to relive, and let me tell you, the ticket price is far too steep.

Hubby, ever my hero, noticed my growing restlessness and wisely proposed we escape—rain be damned! His boet, clearly a man who knows where sanity truly lies, eagerly tagged along. Together, we braved the downpour, heading to the bar like weary sailors seeking refuge from a storm.

Meanwhile, Di, in what can only be described as peak Di fashion, remained behind in the lounge. There she was, serenely munching on an apple as chainsaw-wielding maniacs screamed their way through her cinematic nightmare. Unbothered, unflappable, and apparently immune to the chaos, she could’ve given a TED Talk on calmness under pressure. But hey, we all seek peace in our own unique ways.

The restaurant bar was practically a Noah’s Ark of soggy travellers, all huddled under the shade like rain-soaked animals seeking refuge. The boys nursed their beers, clearly basking in the universal male bond of “surviving chaos together,” while I sipped my shandy, a bastion of class amidst the mud-streaked madness. Below us, the hippos lounged in the river, blissfully oblivious to the rain as if mocking our human need for shelter and dryness.

And then, as if the universe decided we deserved a reward for surviving the day’s escapades, we saw it—an amazing sight, one that was so perfect it almost made the rain, the chaos, and the chainsaw frenzy worth it.

The screech of a fish eagle was our dramatic opening act, pulling us out into the drizzle and against the balcony as if nature itself had reserved front-row seats for us. Pure magic, right? But wait—this wasn’t just a one-hit wonder; the show was about to get even better.

There they were—two majestic fish eagles sharing their island with two decidedly dowdy-looking birds who had clearly missed the memo on proper feather fashion. Boet, ever the naturalist armed with technology, grabbed his phone to identify these underdressed fowls. The revelation? They were the chicks of our star fish eagles, and mom and dad had decided to host flying school right in front of our eyes. Watching the little ones wobble and flap like their wings while they were on training wheels was a heartwarming comedic spectacle—a family drama worthy of its own National Geographic special. Nature knows how to put on a show, even in the rain!

The next morning, the storm had downgraded from "end-of-days apocalypse" to the moody defiance of a teenager who's just been told to clean their room. The rain kept falling, but now it was doing so with the sullen attitude of someone who really didn’t care about doing a good job. By mid-afternoon, it became clear we had all reached our living-together limit—one more second and someone was bound to use a spatula as a deadly weapon. Salvation arrived in the form of a unanimous decision to flee the chalet and find civilization (or at least alcohol) at the restaurant again.

Di, having declared her significant other (and the rest of us) unworthy of her affections, had resumed her noble quest to refill the atmosphere with a fog of cigarette smoke. She was soon joined by a neighbour who clearly shared her passion for social puffing. Together it looked like Van Hunk and the Devil were settled in for a long night to rival the legend on Table mountain. The three of us abandoned them to their nicotine filled haven and trudged to the restaurant, resembling a group of shipwreck survivors searching for dry land. After a couple of drinks, things started looking up: the rain became whimsical instead of oppressive, and life suddenly felt less like a bad sitcom.

Below us, hippos lounged in the pool, draped in water hyacinths like Roman emperors who’d just discovered the concept of bath bombs. Their grunts provided the background music for our newfound serenity—life seemed to be levelling out. But, as always, the Gods weren’t quite done toying with us.

As darkness fell, we felt the need to return for the obligatory burnt offerings masquerading as a braai dinner. That’s when we heard it: a noise. The kind of noise that stops you mid-step and makes you briefly consider your life insurance policy.

“Is that a hippo?” Boet asked, as though I moonlighted as a wildlife interpreter. My husband, ever the hero, clutched my arm with the gentle panic of someone realizing their bravery might be conditional. “Maybe we should go the long way,” I suggested, my calm tone barely masking the hysteria bubbling underneath. The boys, for once, nodded in solemn agreement, and we backtracked onto a dark, ominous road while the rain helpfully ensured we’d remain damp and miserable.

Another couple appeared, clearly having the same genius idea to avoid certain death. We walked carefully aware of every sound. Then a catastrophe! Alas, our progress was thwarted by a giant puddle that gleamed menacingly in the path ahead. Surrendering to fate, we decided to retrace some of our steps, comforted by the thought that whatever was making the noise was now firmly behind us.

As we moved cautiously back along the bricked path, we let our faster-moving companions take the lead—after all, why risk being the first line of defence? Suddenly, the noise returned, louder this time. Five people froze in synchronized terror.

“I think it’s a hippo,” someone whispered, because stating the obvious always helps in life-or-death situations. “We could go back to the road and through the puddle,” I offered with pseudo-hope, though my inner coward was already planning a strategic retreat. But the other couple, clearly more rugged than us, declared, “No, we’ll run.”

“Oh, good,” I replied with the cheer of someone volunteering someone else for a dangerous experiment. “Please scream if there’s a problem.”

And so, we waited, apprehensively, standing motionless in the darkness like contestants in a paused and twisted game show. When no screams pierced the night, I feigned optimism: “Well then, let’s try it.” Secretly, I calculated my odds. After all, I only needed to outrun one person, and statistically, I liked my chances. Sometimes survival is just about strategy.

Boet puffed valiantly behind us, a portrait of bravery—or perhaps just someone who had spent a lifetime indulging in fried delicacies, high-calorie alcohol, and having a wife who helped in chain-smoking his way to oxygen deprivation stardom. “Go on ahead,” he wheezed with the kind of self-sacrifice usually seen in war movies, except his pace was less of a heroic sprint and more of a slow-motion shuffle. My inner wisdom, ever the realist, whispered the undeniable truth: sticking with the slow poke vastly increased my own chances of survival. Besides, hubby wasn’t about to abandon his younger brother, even if said brother was currently auditioning for a lung-capacity commercial.

“No chance we are leaving you!” I said, feigning courage with the conviction of a bad soap opera actress. “We have a better chance if we stick together.” I paused dramatically, as though delivering a line from Shakespeare. “Anyway, there are no screams, so the others must have made it through!” Ah yes, the classic survival logic: no screams mean safety. I conveniently swallowed the glaring truth that hippos are basically homicidal tanks—prone to mood swings, notoriously fast, and statistically more dangerous than lions. Likely, their temper stems from the crushing realization that they’ll never get a top star role in the show Wild Africa. Tragic, really the way people like the big cats.

So, en masse, we began our noble march into the darkness, jumping at every rustle, snap, and imaginary shadow. Boet huffed and puffed in the rear like an underpowered steam engine, while the rest of us moved forward with the grace of badly oiled puppets. Finally, salvation appeared: lights in the distance! The path became more visible, and I dared to exhale the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

“We did it!” I breathed, momentarily triumphant. Then reality crashed back down. We still had to survive the braai—a perilous ritual that transforms innocent meat into charred offerings, lethal to a vegetarian and always served with a side of passive-aggressive commentary. One danger down, another to go. Such is life in the wilderness.

## Gazebo Woes and Gravel Road Bouncing

On Friday morning the luxury of Ngwenya had to be left as the resort turfed us out with a polite shove into the wilderness, The campers were ready the twins practically bouncing like caffeinated jackrabbits in joy. Di, on the other hand, was channelling the spirit of a sulking house cat, slouched miserably in the car as we set off on our grand escapade, cigarettes at the ready for our first stop. The master plan? To conquer the park with a charming little camping spot conveniently located by the Numbi Gate called Pretorius Kop.

I must explain the Kruger Park. The Kruger Park is just one of South Africa's sprawling slice of untamed wilderness, where visitors often forget that "large" doesn’t just mean ample parking space. According to the brilliant commentary of one very British lady, the park’s vastness seems to catch tourists by surprise, almost as much as the realization that its inhabitants are, well, *wild*. This is not the dreamy, trunk holding stroll with elephants type of safari—it’s more “stay in your vehicle and hope the lions haven’t discovered the open window.” In other words it a bit more dangerous than the average playpark, but considerably less dangerous than most South African cities.

Kruger’s strict speed limits—50 km/h on tar roads and 40 km/h on gravel—aren’t suggestions; they’re survival tactics. After all, spotting a rhino at top speed might lead to less "ooh" and more "oops." And speaking of survival, the park's no-body-part-outside-the-vehicle rule is less about modesty and more about not offering yourself as a midday snack. Unless you're at a designated stop, that is—those magical zones where the wildlife and park authorities have reportedly signed a contract in which the animals agree to avoid munching on the leather wallets of paying guests.

So, visitors beware: Kruger isn’t just a park. It’s a lesson in patience, awe, and mild existential dread. Enjoy the adventure but maybe don’t wave your hand out the window unless you want it to wave goodbye.

There is one time to avoid the Kruger park. This is called Free week.

Free week at Kruger National Park should be known as "The Hunger Games: Wildlife Edition." Once a year, the otherwise exorbitantly priced park magnanimously throws open its gates to the locals, allowing them a cost-free opportunity to test just how fast they can run from lions, all in the noble name of education.

Throw in a free week paired with a sweltering 30°plus Celsius, and you’ve concocted the ultimate chaos cocktail. The locals, desperate for relief, descend upon the only feasible solution—a free swimming pool that, oh-so-generously, only demands bus fare. It’s practically an open invitation for every residential area surrounding Kruger to empty its population into the well placed watery oasis which is present at most of the San Parks camp sites.

Visualise the arrival of busloads packed to the brim with screaming kids, parents, and a hefty side of booze. The pool, once envisioned as a place of calm serenity, now becomes a cacophonous arena of cannonballs, inflatable armadas, and occasional disputes over whose cooler has the best drink selection. Somewhere amidst the chaos, the sun gleefully beats down, turning sunscreen into a mere suggestion and sweaty delirium into the unspoken dress code. Welcome to paradise—Kruger style.

The officials, of course, frame it as an enriching cultural experience. Meanwhile, the lions are probably prepping for their annual buffet—because why chase down a zebra when the humans come pre-seasoned with sunscreen and picnic crumbs?

It’s a win-win, really. The locals get free entry; the predators get a little excitement; and the park officials get to pat themselves on the back for their charitable gesture—all while secretly hoping someone wanders too close to the elephant herd for that perfect selfie.

Back to us and a meandering journey through the park, before we finally reached our destination of Pretorius Kop. As we unloaded ourselves into the cool of the park office, the peace and calm of booking in with an air conditioned room, did not escape us weary travellers.

Di and I, in a rare display of unity that could rival a UN summit, declared the pool as our non-negotiable priority when we got to the camp site. Being the ever-devoted wives that we are, we did the only logical thing: left the husbands to melt in the sun while erecting Camp Chaos. Armed with icy drinks and a shared sense of self-preservation, we bolted for the blessed oasis of chlorinated water, where we could sip, splash, and silently gloat about our tactical brilliance.

Fun fact:, Pretorius kop pool aside from its safari allure, doubled as the unofficial playground for every local child within a 10-kilometer radius during free week. We were in the free week challenge. And Pretorius kop is one of the closest camps with a pool to the Kruger Park entry gates.

As we approached the pool, we were greeted by a sight that could only be described as a social experiment gone wrong—what appeared to be 90% of South Africa had squeezed themselves into a pool that looked more like an oversized puddle than a recreational facility. Undeterred (or maybe slightly delusional), we took the plunge, expertly navigating past sunbathing ladies with their feet lazily dipped into the water and a cacophony of shrieking children engaged in what can only be called a DIY drowning workshop.

The pool, murky enough to rival the waters of the Crocodile River, offered depths that seemed determined to challenge every child’s swimming skills—or lack thereof. And while the scene screamed "lifeguard emergency," the indifferent caregivers were putting on a masterclass in ignoring imminent danger, sipping on their drinks as though they were at a luxury spa rather than presiding over a survival-of-the-fittest drama.

Cue Di, our heroine in mismatched swimwear. With the energy of a woman who had finally found her calling in life, she dove into action. Snatching up a flailing child, she promptly transformed into an impromptu swim coach, barking out instructions on floating, breathing, and occasionally not inhaling water like it’s your new favourite beverage. Meanwhile, I played the role of glorified pool bouncer, dragging one pint-sized drowning candidate after another to the edge, earning looks of mild gratitude—or perhaps confusion—before they scurried back to their oblivious parents and teachers.

And so, we spent our afternoon heroically battling murky waters, reckless parenting, bad teaching and our own disbelief. A free safari may have its lions, but the real danger was lurking in Pretorius Kop’s pool.

Meanwhile, back at Camp Davos, the twins were thoroughly engaged in their highly productive routine of lounging in four strategically placed deck chairs, chugging litres of beer in the blazing sun like they were competing for a gold medal in dehydration. I helpfully suggested putting up some shade—you know, to prevent them from spontaneously combusting—but this was met with the kind of enthusiasm you’d expect from being asked to dig trenches in the desert sun. Begrudgingly, at my insistence, they wrestled with a gazebo that appeared to have been designed by someone who thought the average camper was the size of a garden gnome. Watching them was like witnessing a slow-motion disaster, equal parts tragic and hilarious.

While they bumbled their way through shade installation, I decided to tackle the kitchen setup, a task that led me to the discovery of Boet in full-blown "celebrity chef" mode. Channelling his inner Jamie Oliver—but with none of the flair or edible results—he was crafting what he clearly believed to be a culinary masterpiece: two slices of bread lovingly smothered with cheese, apricot jam, and a generous dollop of bully beef. Forget Michelin stars, this was the culinary equivalent of abstract art. Di and I, still bound by our fragile United Nations ceasefire, shot synchronized glares of disapproval at the twins, who were nearly glowing with pride over their Frankenstein sandwich. Di, clearly unimpressed by the gastronomic circus, chose the high road: an apple and a packet of cancer sticks, retreating to her chair with an air of dignified disdain. I, on the other hand, took a stab at making my cheese sandwich marginally less shameful by adding lettuce and tomato—because nothing says "healthy meal" like desperately sprinkling a few greens onto a pile of carbs and calling it a salad.

Eventually, the heat finally broke us. The idea of slow roasting ourselves under the unforgiving sun, with the gazebo offering all the cooling power of a cardboard box, didn’t seem quite as charming anymore. In a rare moment of collective sanity, we decided to venture out and observe the local wildlife.

Boet’s camper was designated as the noble steed for this escapade, primarily because dismantling our camper was akin to performing a full-blown engineering project. And, naturally, Boet's aversion to anyone—not even his beloved twin—driving a vehicle meant we didn’t even entertain the idea of taking turns. After all, why share the joys of navigating gravel roads at questionable speeds when one can monopolize them?

Di and I, in true backseat royalty fashion, were issued the camper’s bed. "Comfort" was a relative term here, given we were bouncing around like popcorn kernels on a hot stove at every turn. Our immediate survival instinct kicked in as we wedged ourselves into the least precarious positions we could find. Di, perhaps trying to curb her impulse for a quick "cancer stick," rummaged around for chewing gum, while I clung desperately to my binoculars and drink. The binoculars were for wildlife spotting, obviously, and the drink? Well, survival. Thank the heavens above for the brilliance of leakproof wine cups. God bless America indeed—where wine serving innovation saves both sanity and hydration.

Meanwhile, our chauffeurs at the front—the twins—had seemingly forgotten we existed. Their driving style suggested we were on some kind of Dakar Rally gravel stage, rather than a leisurely game drive. Every pothole was met with a cheer from the front and a silent prayer from the back. Di and I exchanged looks of resigned disbelief, the kind that comes from knowing your current survival strategy involves both sheer luck and unshakable optimism while silently debating whether the wildlife would be more or less hazardous—than this joyride.

Three hours of playing hide-and-seek with invisible wildlife in the thick vegetation had really put our patience to the test. After squinting into the greenery until our eyeballs were dry, we decided to pivot to a more predictable attraction. Mestel Dam beckoned, with its ever-reliable hippos who seemed content to soak up the day doing their best impression of floating rocks. Shitlhave Dam teased us with the sight of reedbuck, grazing smugly like they were part of an exclusive club, while the ever-elusive wild dogs continued their masterclass in vanishing acts. At this point, we officially waved the white flag and admitted defeat—if the wildlife wasn’t going to entertain us, the restaurant and its liquid refreshment surely would.

Back at camp, the restaurant proved more predictable than the wild dogs. Cold beers for the boys—because nothing pairs better with dehydration than even more dehydration—Di’s faithful diet coke, and my Sprite Zero, because why not embrace a sugar-free lifestyle after such a sweet defeat in the bush? Hubby, in his trademark display of generosity, offered me his sacred beer supply for my shandy creation. It’s always nice to know that even after hours of gravel-road driving, sun exposure, and wildlife disappointment, there’s still room for charity—a few drops of beer mixed with soda in the name of refreshing compromise.

Then followed our ubiquitous braai which was overshadowed by the greater triumph: raising our glasses to our collective resilience (or perhaps just stubbornness) as we laughed at our safari misadventures and silently plotted revenge against those invisible wild dogs.

## "The Hyena Sleeps Tonight, But We’re Wide Awake"

With the luxury of electricity fading behind us, we waved goodbye to Pretorius Kop receding into the distance in a gloriously dramatic cloud of dust, we embarked on our next epic odyssey. Boet had booked the sites, and due to a lack of vacant camp site( his story) he had decided we would go to Balule Satellite Camp—because what’s more appealing than leaving behind civilization for a charming slice of wilderness with no electricity and facilities so basic they make a bush look luxurious? Naturally, Balule is beloved by visitors who revel in the idea of "getting away from it all"—although, in this case, "it all" includes lights, locks, and the comforting absence of prowling predators. It’s all part of the charm of being in the bush, really. Who needs electricity when you have the distinct possibility of a lion’s midnight visit to keep things electrifying?

The twins however, far from bemoaning this oncoming lack were welcoming the chance to live on the edge with solar panels being the differentiator between us and the savage beasts. I should add Balule’s claim to fame isn’t just its central location near Olifants River or the promise of raw, untamed nature, nor the well-appointed kitchen—it’s the tiny fence, which could generously be described as a gentle suggestion to wildlife rather than an actual barrier. It’s the perfect setup for those who enjoy living life on the edge and being one with nature literally.

Our first decree of survival was crystal clear to me: lunch was non-negotiable. I needed a meal that was not lovingly charred over heat sources with carcinogenic tendencies. Thus, we set our sights on Olifants Rest Camp, perched quite literally on the edge of a incline looking over the Olifants river.

The camp had it all: breathtaking views, a touch of elegance, and the distinct absence of animals. Apparently, the wildlife had orchestrated a full-scale conspiracy against us. Perhaps they’d caught wind of our plans and decided it wasn’t worth the effort to show up. Lions, elephants, and even the usually dependable impalas—gone without a trace, leaving us to dine in a peaceful but suspiciously barren landscape.

Undeterred, we soldiered on, treating the meal as an act of defiance against Mother Nature’s sense of humour. We savoured our semi-edible over-priced sustenance and laughed about how the animals must be plotting their next move—probably watching us from behind bushes while snickering in wild dog-speak. Lunch wasn’t just lunch—it was a battle cry declaring, “We’ll find you, wild dogs! You can’t hide forever!”

Di and I, once again bonded in the face of adversity, took a deep breath as we braced ourselves for Balule’s “charming simplicity.” No electricity? No worries, we had solar. Phone charging a distant dream? Totally fine, we love being one with nature! As we steeled our nerves and suppressed a collective whimper, the sweet promise of wild dogs spurred us on. Surely, this time we would encounter the elusive creatures—after all, rugged campers who’d stayed here before practically had a National Geographic episode unfold before them, complete with leopards serving tree-top dinners. How could we, with our undeniable determination, possibly miss out?

But the wilderness had other plans. We reached the camp, brimming with optimism, only to discover that it wasn’t just the wild dogs playing hard to get—our booking had also disappeared into the ether. Apparently, nothing screams “true wilderness experience” like a game of “find your reservation.” The lack of signal was undoubtedly part of Balule’s charm—a gentle reminder that if you encounter an unfortunate eating incident, your last moments will be entirely yours, uninterrupted by frantic calls or texts. Need to Google “how to survive an elephant stampede”? Too bad! Balule insists you go full wilderness mode and rely on sheer instinct—or perhaps a wildly misplaced sense of optimism.

Still, it does offer one silver lining: no social media updates about how you’re bravely “embracing nature” while secretly longing for Wi-Fi. Balule doesn’t just promise simplicity; it delivers it with the ruthless efficiency of a phone signal black hole.

Cue Boet, who, with the fury of a man determined to prove he belongs in a different travel party, sped off at the required 30 Km per hour for the 31 Km drive back Oilfants River Rest Camp and the required phone signal to sort out the debacle. Meanwhile, hubby and I were left at the gate, feigning nonchalance under the watchful eye of the stern guardian who seemed ready to swat us away like a pair of troublesome flies. We shuffled awkwardly, trying not to give off “homeless camper” vibes, while resigning ourselves to a two hour wait as the thrill of elusive dogs gave way to the sobering realization that even a promise of simplicity comes with its own brand of chaos.

Eventually, Boet, Di, and the all-important permit returned triumphantly, allowing us to slink sheepishly past the stern gatekeeper and into Balule Satellite Camp—a camp so petite it could easily double as a private parking lot. Naturally, in a place where “parking class” is determined by the side of the fence, our impeccable planning landed us in the exclusive “other side of that spot.” Clearly, we’re trendsetters in the field of parking mediocrity.

With the campers set up, we turned our attention to the pièce de résistance of modern convenience: solar power. Now, solar is an impressive concept—when there’s sun. Unfortunately for us, the weather gods had other plans, gifting us with a thick, glorious bank of cloud that stretched as far as the eye could see. It wasn’t just a little overcast; it was nature’s way of reminding us that we should have packed extra torches or perhaps made friends with a lightning bug.

As we gazed wistfully at the sky and our decidedly sun-starved solar panels, the irony wasn’t lost on us: embracing simplicity apparently meant embracing a reliance on the one element completely missing from the equation. Back to basics indeed, where basics seem to include cloud-watching and increasingly sarcastic remarks about the wonders of renewable energy.

But we were in Balule, with the lovely kitchen area enticingly near. Our obligatory braai, modest thanks to the critical shortage of wood and charcoal, thus demanded the kind of close attention usually reserved for fine dining chefs. Every piece of sizzling meat was supervised as though a Michelin star was at stake, while the salads were assembled with the speed and precision of an Olympic relay team.

For me, of course, this was no issue. Vegetarian burger patties are the sort of gourmet delight that only demand five minutes of attention before they achieve their full potential: tasting exactly like warmed-up leftovers. Why complicate things with culinary finesse when you can embrace mediocrity in its most delicious form?

The combination of smoky meat, hurried salads, and vegetable patties turned our braai into a celebration of minimal effort, proving that even in the wilderness, creativity and sarcasm can transform a meal into a masterpiece—or at least a warm pile of sustenance.

Just as we began to luxuriate in the simple joys of eating in the wild, our evening was elevated to a whole new level of drama. Enter the hyenas, with one particular large individual seemingly assigned as the camp’s entertainment director, as it patrolled the fence with all the casual menace of a bouncer checking IDs. Arms reach, they said—because nothing puts you in touch with nature quite like dining next to an apex scavenger with questionable manners.

Did I mention my unequivocal disdain for hyenas? Previous encounters with them in the bush were less “Hakuna Matata” and more “Rabid Horror Show.” Dinner parties, in my humble opinion, should include friends, good food, and maybe a nice bottle of wine—not a stalking hyena who might just add you to the menu.

Still, we soldiered on, expertly juggling our fear and food. Perhaps the hyena was just trying to bond with us—or perhaps it was waiting for the moment we dropped our guard. Either way, it left me pondering one profound truth: dinner by fence-light loses a bit of its charm when you’re eye-to-eye with a predator whose laugh isn’t half as funny as Disney led us to believe.

We unanimously decided that the dishes could enjoy a restful evening untouched until morning because, frankly, nothing says “wilderness retreat” like putting off responsibilities until daylight. As the night set in, our ever-dedicated gatekeeper began lighting paraffin lamps. Their cozy glow did absolutely nothing to highlight the treacherous wildlife hazards lurking in the shadows, but hey, ambiance over safety, right? With that sorted, we dutifully tucked our cups, knives, and forks into bed in the camper like precious porcelain children.

Next on my agenda was the sacred bedtime cleaning ritual. Shower or bath—it’s non-negotiable in my world. My reconnaissance earlier had revealed that San Parks had bestowed upon us a miraculous wonder: a bath connected to a gas geyser creating a true oasis amidst the rustic chaos. Armed with this life-changing knowledge, I changed into my trusty dressing gown, leaving behind all my worldly valuables except my phone (For the torch) in the camper because one never knows what a bath may demand. My toiletry bag packed and torch alight, I led my less-than-confident sister-in-law on a pilgrimage to the bathroom. Under the romantic glow of the paraffin lamps, she declared me her snake whisperer, her ultimate guardian of indoor plumbing safety.

After playing detective with my cellphone torch, thoroughly inspecting every corner of the toilet for scorpions, spiders, and any rogue snakes plotting a jump scare, she finally mustered the courage to use the facilities—with the door barely ajar for that extra sense of security, of course. While I was commanded to wait as her reluctant guardian- her angel of the night so to speak.

Feeling accomplished, she announced, "I’m not going to shower tonight," as though conquering the bathroom itself was a Herculean feat.

I escorted her back to the camper, where she flopped down with the dramatic flair of a mountaineer conquering Everest—minus the ice pick but with all the exhaustion. Without a second thought, she slammed the door shut, barricading herself in her fortress of safety with the efficiency of someone evading a zombie apocalypse. Meanwhile, I was left outside, heroically offered up as a midnight snack to the creatures of the night. With my duties as protector complete, it was time for me to indulge in my prize: the holy grail of camping luxury—the bath. Marching back like a victorious queen, I sank into the warm water as shadows danced under the paraffin glow. It was bliss, pure and simple, and for a few fleeting moments, the wilderness didn’t seem so daunting after all.

## The Canine Disappearance Act"

After a restless night with the delightful chuckle of hyenas for a lullaby, we woke to find the cloud had disappeared- A quick rusk and coffee and we were prepared to hunt the wild dogs.

Di, whose most notable contribution to the pristine environment thus far had been a cloud of cigarette smoke that could rival industrial pollution, had inexplicably spent the morning feeding birds—despite repeated warnings that “disturbing the animals” was frowned upon. Naturally, she considered the warnings mere suggestions, much like speed limits or expiration dates on milk. Now, as we prepared to embark on another leg of this ill-fated safari, Di suddenly announced she felt a *tremendous urge* not to join us. The irony? She’d been the loudest advocate for this trip in the first place, back when it was just an idea thrown around over burnt toast and bad coffee. Her desire for the wild had been inspiring, raw and misleading since the luxury of driving in the wild was not faded, but completely absent.

Boet, who had long mastered the art of marital diplomacy (mainly through trial and frequent errors), realized that convincing Di to rejoin the group was going to require the negotiation skills of a United Nations envoy—minus the neutral territory. He took a deep breath and approached her, walking like a particularly scared cat carefully dodging the trail of breadcrumbs she had been flinging at a particularly aggressive hornbill.

“Di, my girl,” he began, adopting the tone of someone trying to sell an underwater timeshare, “you can’t abandon us now. The wild dogs are waiting! It’s the thrill of the hunt, the call of the wild, the—”

Di snorted, letting out a puff of smoke that seemed to whisper, “I’m in charge now.” She tapped her cigarette against a rock with the precision of someone who had mastered passive-aggressive communication in one elegant motion. After further negotiation, resulting in hubby muttering to me about murdering family members, the negotiations were concluded. Clearly savouring the newfound power she’d claimed over the group dynamics, she finally declared, “Fine.”

Standing up with the dramatic flair of a 18th Century villain whose schemes had just succeeded, she flicked ash towards the ground like she was christening it with her victory. Then, with a dismissive wave that could rival a queen acknowledging peasants, she gestured towards me.

“I’ll sit in the back with her,” she said, like my presence was the only saving grace in this disaster of a road trip.

Her eagle gaze shifted towards Boet, and she leaned in with a pointed stare. “But *drive properly,*” she added, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “It’s very uncomfy on the bed.”

Boet opened his mouth to protest that it was not, in fact, *a bed,* but a perfectly adequate seat, that became a bed, only to realize he’d just been reduced to the family chauffeur with no room for rebuttal. Di, pleased with herself, stubbed out her cigarette like she’d just conquered the Himalayas leaving everyone scrambling to meet her demands of a diet coke and her chewing gum.

Boet had confidently decided we would find the dogs. They were in the area; they had been seen. The results were guaranteed. After all, how hard could it be to find wild dogs? They’re "wild" and "dogs"—basic, right? Armed with a dodgy map and an air of unearned confidence, we set off.

Squashed into the bed seat, I glared at the toilet wall as though it was a portal to another dimension as we bounced along, grabbing binoculars that seemed to be determined to destroy my ample chest decorations or my nose which now seemed to reach said chest.

We rattled along for an eternity and the only dogs we encountered were the logos on discarded snack wrappers and photos of the Scotties sent by our eldest daughter. Di, now on her third cigarette break, declared the trip a disaster and accused Boet of being “the worst driver in history and a useless dog finder.” Boet countered by saying that nobody asked her to chain-smoke her way through the park. Tensions were high.

Desperate Boet now turns the camper onto another gravel road. The road was rough, and the camper hit a pothole the size of a crater. "That's a sign!” Declares the individual who identifies as a wildlife expert at the forefront. After surviving the shockwave, we continued at a pace just slightly slower than a tortoise experiencing an existential crisis. Hours pass, and wildlife sightings abound—if you count the parade of impala, who seem to have taken a vow to appear every five minutes, as if mocking the group’s expectations. "Wild dogs are probably hunting them," Hubby declares confidently, despite the impala grazing peacefully and the conspicuous absence of anything resembling a predator.

Finally, we meet the spot where the dogs had definitely been seen. The camper stops. Four pairs of eyes observe the ground with intensity. A heated debate ensues over the finer points of distinguishing wild dog tracks from the marks left by particularly determined guinea fowl. After desperate Google searches and questionable deductive reasoning, we decide we are hot on the trail. Two hours later, we realize we now are following our own tire tracks in circles. We spot movement in the distance. Binoculars are grabbed, cameras poised, hearts racing... and there they are! Wild dogs! Except, oh wait—those are baboons. Another debate erupts over whether baboons are honorary wild dogs. The consensus? Absolutely not. Spirits are briefly lifted when someone suggests the dogs are merely playing hide-and-seek and we will see them around the next corner. The actual wild dogs, undoubtedly observing this circus from a safe distance, decided they had no intention of being found by these people.

Night falls, and with it, so do our dreams of finding wild dogs. Defeated and dustier than an abandoned chalkboard, we slink back to Bahule, our spirits as low as our fuel gauge. The camper rattles into the campsite like a metal dinosaur limping to extinction. One by one, we tumble out of the van, bedraggled and exhausted.

Just as we're preparing to perform the ceremonial Dust Scrubbing Ritual of Shame, the camp’s self-appointed harbinger of bad timing strolls over. "Oh, you poor dears!" she gushes, the enthusiasm practically dripping from her pores. "You JUST missed them! The wild dogs were RIGHT here—literally outside the camp fence, by YOUR campsite!"

There’s a collective pause as we process this. Someone lets out a strangled laugh, though it’s hard to tell if it’s hysteria or an attempt to keep from crying. Another member of our group looks at the ground as if considering the logistics of digging a hole and never coming out.

But our gleeful informant isn’t done. "Such a pity!" she says, as if we’ve lost a lottery jackpot, rather than an encounter with an apex predator. "They were frolicking, playing, oh, it was magical! Right in front of where you're standing now, in fact." She gestures dramatically, as if we needed a more vivid picture of the joy we’ll never know. “We had a front row view of them! Fantastic! Did you see much on your drive?”

Defeated while the dust clings even harder, we lie valiantly ” yes lots.“ Shoulders drooping, resigned to our defeat and thoroughly outdone by the whims of nature, we retreat to the paraffin lit showers. I still wonder how the wild dogs managed to pull off this epic troll. Somewhere out there, I imagine them snickering in their painted coats, giving each other high fives—or, well, high paws—for their perfectly timed appearance and disappearance act.

## Hyena Hysteria

The wild dogs continued to be elusive, but my not so favourite animal in the jungle was not. The hyena seemed to dog our every step. The one most prolific in the Kruger is the spotted hyena. These animals are not just scavengers. They are cunning creatures more organized than they let on, with clans that function like well-oiled chaos machines.

My distrust with hyenas kicked off when I was just 10 years old, thanks to a delightful cocktail of unemployment and terrorism that shipped us off to a wild and untamed place on the Mazoe River just off the Mozambican border. Now, it wasn’t exactly advertised as “Hyena Central,” but someone clearly forgot to mention that to the local wildlife. Case in point: the unfortunate civil engineer before us.

This man had the misfortune of a close encounter with a so-called “friendly” hyena who wasn’t after polite conversation but a late-night snack. The poor guy survived the ordeal—rabies shots and all—but let’s just say his mental state didn’t bounce back quite as well. In fact, his laugh took on a distinctly hyena-esque quality that was equal parts tragic and unsettling. It was as if he’d been spiritually adopted by the very creature that nearly made him dinner. And thus, my mistrust of those cackling scavengers was born, with that madman’s laugh echoing in the background like the soundtrack of a bad horror movie.

Come sundown in this perilous paradise, we had no choice but to barricade ourselves in our trusty little Sprite caravan—a cramped fortress equipped with the bare essentials, including the ever-dignified potty. Because let’s face it, the alternative of braving the long drop in the dead of night could have easily turned us into the dinner special for a wandering predator or a chew toy for a cranky snake.

Our caravan, as tiny as it was, stood valiantly as our last line of defence against the untamed whims of Mother Nature’s not-so-charming welcome committee. Night after night, my stepfather, mother, baby half-brother, me, and our three dogs—squeezed into this glorified tin can. It wasn’t just tight; it was a masterclass in survival-themed sardine packing, all while hoping that our patchwork defences weren’t just there for decoration.

Inside, the vibe was less “calm family retreat” and more “siege preparation.” My stepfather had his trusty .303 rifle like he was auditioning for the role of a medieval knight defending the kingdom. My younger brother and I clutched handguns with the kind of determination that suggested we might have been ready to face down a lion—or possibly an overly aggressive squirrel. Meanwhile, my anti-violence mother clung to her carefully curated pillow stack, firmly convinced that her fortress of fluff would somehow protect us from nature’s tooth-and-claw reality. Bless her optimism. Outside, our livestock stood as vulnerable pawns in the grand chessboard of the wilderness, surrounded by a patchwork of sticks, stones, and a wire fence that screamed “best we could do” louder than it offered any real assurance.

Each crackle of a twig or rustle in the bushes felt like a prelude to catastrophe, as if the local wildlife was gathering just out of sight to test our flimsy defences. The fence wasn’t just keeping the animals in—it was trying, valiantly but perhaps futilely, to keep predators out.

It was survival at its finest—minus the glam, the space, or any real comfort. When darkness descended, it wasn't just a shift in the sky—it was an invitation to the hyenas to begin their nightly ritual of terror. Like clockwork, their laughter erupted, piercing through the silence with an eerie, bone-chilling precision. It wasn’t just a sound; it was an assault on the senses, a cruel symphony orchestrated to shred nerves and unravel courage. Every cackle felt like a deliberate jab, mocking the thin walls of our caravan and making us question whether they were merely spectators—or plotting something far worse.

The hyenas seemed to revel in their role as the architects of paranoia, circling invisibly yet audibly in the night. Their laughter wasn’t just unsettling—it was triumphant, a soundtrack to our dread, performed with the confidence of creatures who knew they owned the night. And there we were, trapped in the audience, clinging to safety and sanity with every fibre of our being.

When I came to South Africa it seemed the people in this country and the rest of the world lived in a fantasy world where hyenas are nothing more than fluffy, misunderstood cuties . My stance was firmly grounded in caution, not cuddles, until we found ourselves face-to-face with one on the side of the road.

It loped alongside our vehicle with the casual confidence of a well-trained dog, its bright, intelligent eyes scanning us with what felt like unnerving curiosity. Di, ever the adventurer, decided this was the perfect time to gush over its beauty and, horror of horrors, tried to open the window for a closer look. My firm opposition to this reckless move was met with little more than rolled eyes—but the hyena seemed to appreciate my caution.

As I observed it pacing gracefully, something shifted in my perception. It wasn’t a mindless terror or a monster; it was a fellow survivor in a world that demanded grit and adaptability. Watching its movements and sensing its quiet strength, I began to respect not only its resilience but the complex social structure and resourcefulness that allow hyenas to thrive in an often cruel and unforgiving environment. They may still have jaws of steel, but perhaps they’re not the villains I once imagined.

Maybe because I had come to a more understanding conclusion, the fates decided to toss us a cosmic bone with the most incredible sighting—a hyena nursery. There they were, the pups, still black and oh-so-adorable, tumbling around on the road like tiny balls of chaos, blissfully unaware of their reputations as future apex scavengers. They were a delight to watch and it was hard to reconcile these playful little fluffballs with the bone-crunching beasts they’d grow up to be.

Their resident guardian, an adult hyena, was perched nearby, radiating an aura of “mess-with-my-kids-and-I’ll-show-you-why-we’re-feared.” Its piercing stare followed our every move, making it abundantly clear that any attempt to interfere with the pups would be met with swift and merciless consequences. We didn’t need a second warning—those jaws don’t mess around. Spotted hyenas, in particular, have a strong social structure, and the adults are fiercely protective of their young. Hyena pups, despite their adorable antics, face a tough world where predators are always lurking. Lions are their most significant threat, as they often target hyena cubs to reduce future competition. Leopards, too, can pose a danger, especially if they come across unguarded pups. Additionally, wild dogs and other hyenas from rival clans might attack them if given the chance. These little ones are born into a world where survival is a full-time job, and their mothers take no chances.

It’s a mix of parental love and practical survival instincts—because in the wild, you don’t get second chances.

So, there we were, blessed to be marvelling at the nursery, caught between awe and sheer survival instinct, realizing that in the animal kingdom, parenthood comes with a fierce side. We returned the next day, but the culvert where the pups had gambolled was quiet and there was nothing to be seen. We left with our memories as we continued driving the sand roads, hoping to see another exciting animal viewing.

That day, it seemed the hyenas had signed up to be our uninvited tour guides, dogging our every move with the persistence of overly enthusiastic paparazzi. When we went for breakfast, there they were perched in the bush like some furry critic judging our choice of morning snacks. I could practically feel one of them rating my vegetarian offering with its piercing gaze. A solid 1 out of 10, I’m sure.

By nightfall, the whole pack had decided to join the fun, circling the camp fence like they were auditioning for the role of “most unsettling dinner guests ever.” Just meters away, their cackling felt like a twisted laugh track to our increasingly frayed nerves.

And that’s when it hit us: these creatures weren’t just interested—they were suffering from human contact. Somewhere out there were people who had given them one too many scraps, and now here we were, dealing with the result where the ultimate end would be destruction of the hyenas as the price of idiotic misplaced generosity.

Despite repeated requests—complete with big, bold signs and probably a thousand warnings—some people continue to feed the animals. A bone here, a piece of meat there, because apparently the laws of nature aren’t nearly as important as their selfie moment with the “cute” creatures. Of course, what these culinary philanthropists fail to grasp is that they’re not being kind—they’re basically turning the wild into an all-you-can-eat buffet and signing a death warrant.

It’s not just the animals that suffer from this newfound dependency and expectation; it’s everyone else who now has to deal with a lion or a hyena that associates humans with lunch. Looking at my fellow campers I realised maybe people are too intellectually challenged to understand that feeding wild animals messes up the entire system, or maybe they’re just indifferent enough to ignore decades of hard-earned advice. Either way, bravo humanity, for once again proving that common sense is not so common.

Nowhere was humanity's questionable impact on nature more glaringly obvious than our trip to Sondela after a fire had swept through part of the reserve. As we embarked on a game drive with our very knowledgeable guide—a man whose patience clearly rivalled that of Saint Francis—we casually asked why the buck, particularly the nyala, were spectacularly absent.

The guide, bless his soul, sighed deeply, as if preparing himself for yet another “humans ruin everything” explanation. “People feed them,” he said, with the resigned tone of someone who has said this a thousand times. “And when they smell fire, they think it’s people braaing.”

Yes, you heard that right—the nyala had apparently developed a Pavlovian response to the smell of fire, running toward it like it was an all-you-can-eat buffet instead of fleeing from it like any self-respecting animal should.

Much like humans, animals are governed by their stomachs. Forget survival instincts—why fear fire when it might come with a food platter? Animals end up with the same destructive behaviour humans have. The behaviour of the wild animals seems honestly, a pretty accurate metaphor for humanity itself.

And so, in a twist of irony, we find that the grand divide between human civilization and the untamed wilderness is, in fact, barely a gap at all—just a shared obsession with food. Much like humans eagerly flocking to free samples at the supermarket, these wild animals throw their instincts to the wind for the promise of an easy meal. Fire isn’t terrifying; it’s a dinner bell. Predators aren’t feared; they’re potential caterers.

In the end, their behaviour mirrors our own perfectly—short-term gratification trumping long-term logic. Whether it’s a hyena chasing down scraps or humans overeating at an endless buffet, the result is the same: destructive patterns that create dependencies and chaos. Nature and humanity, locked in the same loop of stubborn survival instincts wrapped neatly around one driving force: their stomachs. Perhaps the only thing that truly separates us is the species we blame when the consequences hit. Bravo, hyenas. Bravo, humans. We’re all in this messy food chain together.

## Hook Line and stinker

There we were, slumped on the couch in the palace of the aged and decrepit, enduring the slow torment of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," a show that could make even the most enthusiastic trivia fan research less boring methods to sleep. It followed straight after "Tipping Point," which was fitting, as hubby and yours truly had already hit ours by that point.

The boys had now reached the level of beer induced hilarity and were engaging in the honoured male pursuit of farting and seeing who was the worst smelling. Mingling with this odiferous farce, the smoke-filled atmosphere wafting from the open patio door was nothing short of a theatrical production—a masterpiece of inhalable despair. It clung to the air with the stubborn persistence of a toddler in full tantrum mode, refusing to budge or dissipate. Breathing it in wasn’t just unpleasant; it was like signing up for a lung endurance challenge you didn’t even know existed.

Di, in her infinite patience (or lack thereof),off course already stormed off to the patio to create her own smelly ashen cloud after delivering a verbal smackdown that included “disgusting,” “ill-bred,” and a colourful array of other critiques on the twins and their upbringing. It was a masterclass in insult delivery, which they found hilarious. Their hilarity did not sit well with Di, who was brooding and planning a revenge tactic as she puffed through her nicotine ninjas. The mingling of smells was inescapable throughout the cottage and as pleasant as living in a swamp.

Faced with the looming threat of either a family meltdown or an environmental disaster (or both), I did what any desperate soul would do—I dangled the idea of a camping trip to Nature’s Valley. Fishing, fresh air, and the faint hope that nature might work its magic on both their relations and the smoke-filled atmosphere.

In the interest of being honest I should add -with the *exception of Di*, of course, who looked about as thrilled by the idea as a cat being tossed into a bathtub.

Removing Di from her beloved smoking area required strategic planning that could rival a military operation. She clung to her territory with the tenacity of a mussel glued to a rock. It took a combination of persuasion, pleading, and perhaps mild threats to pry her loose, and even then, it felt like we’d crossed some unspoken line. With Di finally unseated, and only slightly mutinous, the rest of us began the frantic scramble to prepare for this so-called "relaxing getaway."

Fast-forward twenty-four hours, and we were on the road, hurtling toward adventure—or, more accurately, hurtling toward inevitable chaos. I had insisted, in the name of proper camping etiquette, on a two-night trip. This decision was met with the kind of unanimous groaning usually reserved for burnt toast at breakfast. But my resolve was unwavering, fuelled by a naïve optimism that clearly hadn’t been squashed yet by years of questionable life choices.

Hubby and I started our great camping adventure the only way we knew how—by embarking on a heroic shopping quest for essentials. Milk, bread, and, of course, supplies for the all-important braai (because camping without a braai is basically just homelessness with snacks). With the necessities secured, we rewarded ourselves with muffins and coffee at the local café, where we discussed the weighty matters of life, like whether the braai would need charcoal or did we need wood as well.

While we leisurely toured a few beaches along our route—staring wistfully at the waves and occasionally pretending to be deep in thought—Di and Boet were allegedly "packing." In reality, this meant wrestling Di’s wardrobe into submission (a task that required the strength of a small rugby team) and darting into every shop that sold snacks, as though preparing for a weeks-long Antarctic expedition. Needless to say, their progress was, shall we say, "unhurried."

Hubby, ever diligent, kept Boet updated while we trundled along the scenic roads, half-expecting to see their camper wobbling into view at any moment. It didn’t. Two hours—and at least three sighs of "They must be lost"—later, we finally arrived at the campsite. We entered with relief, only to find ourselves trapped in a queue behind a couple who appeared to be conducting their very own Nobel-worthy study in Precision Paperwork: The Science of Booking a Chalet. Every detail required a pause, a discussion, and possibly a consultation with the Geneva Convention.

Twenty excruciating minutes later, just as we were contemplating setting up camp *in the queue*, we finally reached the desk. Victory! Although at that point, the muffins from earlier were starting to feel like ancient history, and the prospect of waiting another two hours for Di and Boet was as appealing as sand in our socks.

Fortunately, the long-awaited arrival of the campers was heralded with all the subtlety of a tornado. They roared into the campsite like a rally team who’d accidentally ended up in Nature’s Valley instead of the Dakar. Boet emerged in a cloud of snack papers, which swirled around the camper in a small, self-made cyclone. It was like watching a Hollywood entrance—minus the red carpet, but with added litter.

As the winds of chaos subsided, Boet sauntered over to join me in the queue, radiating the kind of casual energy that only comes from spending two hours packing snacks rather than a sense of urgency. There he stood, looking as relaxed as ever, oblivious to the tedious ritual ahead of us.

Now, for those lucky enough not to have experienced it, SANParks check-ins (such as this charming one at Nature’s Valley) require each camper to individually sign away their life. Seriously, it’s like applying for a mortgage, but with less chance of financial stability and more mosquitoes. Each signature needed meticulous attention, multiple waivers, and at least one moment where you question if camping is worth this level of bureaucracy.

Di, in the throes of acute tobacco deprivation, flat-out refused to make her way to the office. Meanwhile, Boet dutifully soldiered on to tame the wild beast that was our paperwork pile. But, of course, Di’s signature was indispensable, so Boet had to channel his inner track star and sprint across "Smoke-filled Valley" in a desperate bid to coax her out of her nicotine-induced hideout.

After what felt like an epic battle against red tape and overwhelming cravings, all the paperwork was finally finalized. With a flourish of faux pride, I presented my card—only to be promptly and ridiculously overcharged for our two campsites. Apparently, nothing says “luxury camping” like paying a king’s ransom for a patch of grass.

After our overpriced campsite fees had been extracted and bureaucracy finally let us off the hook, we set our sights on the grand establishments of our camping haven. High in spirits we set off in search of our own little slice of peace, only to discover that we were decidedly not the VIPs of tranquility. It seemed that half the nation’s squadron of shrieking teenage tykes had already descended upon our serene getaway, transforming our envisioned haven into a chaotic, low-budget remake of every horror flick known for its agonized screams.

Imagine our delight as our quiet retreat morphed into a live-action soundtrack of terror—only, instead of spine-tingling suspense, it was more like an impromptu toddler talent show gone wildly off-script. As if that weren't enough, the park itself had clearly joined Noah’s reunion tour—surviving the flood with a swagger and leaving behind endless, prolific puddles filled with a sea of murky, dirty water that could rival any modern water park disaster.

Shattered we abandoned the fishing haven site, Boet had fondly looked on as his ideal spot, and we fled into the deeper camping wilderness. Finally coming to rest with a shuddering group of other traumatized campers next to another ablution block.

Oh yes-the ablution facilities. Picture this—bathrooms so minuscule they made a closet look like a sprawling mansion, and showers so aggressively designed that they seemed hell-bent on flooding the entire floor. It was debatable whether we were meant to freshen up or audition for a role in a slapstick water park commercial. In short, our attempts at hygiene became a farcical dance with disco puddles, reminding us that, in camp, even clean-up was an absurd adventure.

However, there we were—by the river and the sea, where the salt air worked its magic, clearing my head and reminding me why nature is worth the chaos. Boet, on the other hand, was thriving in his natural habitat, practically glowing with the joy of being in his element. I feel I must paint you a picture of Boet’s true essence: the man is a walking encyclopaedia of fishing wisdom.

Ask him how to catch trout, and you’d better clear your schedule. He’ll launch into an epic monologue about lures, tactics, and techniques, complete with hand gestures and the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for lottery winners. Boet doesn’t just fish—he *lives* it, breathes it, and probably dreams about it. Honestly, if there were a PhD in fishing, Boet would be the professor emeritus.

Thus, the fishing trip to Nature’s Valley— where Boet, our brave but beleaguered protagonist, had one goal: to prove he was the family’s fishing maestro. Hubby was initiated into the world of lures and rods, which he endured more than enjoyed. Hubby does own a fishing rod, which is now abjectly leaning against a wall, deeply hidden with the other flotsam of his brief but enthusiastic hobbies, sports and DIY projects. The fishing rod has been used in the last twenty years to knock something of a high shelf. The twins are definitely not on the same bandwidth in terms of hobbies.

Surf fishing—is probably Boet’s true passion. Surf fishing is a noble pursuit that seemingly requires an entire arsenal of equipment. Rods, reels, bait boxes, line cutters, waders, tackle bags, but omitting a portable chair and let’s not forget the mysterious devices whose sole function remains shrouded in legend. Add it all up, and it’s less “fishing” and more “logistics.” In theory, surf fishing seems to require enough gear to fill a hall. It should require a team of porters ready to haul this multitude of gear to the nearest beach. Unfortunately, the Cape being fresh out of Sherpas, this leaves Boet to wrestle his mountain of equipment like a one-man expedition to Everest. Unfortunately, this is not a task he can do often, not because of lack of desire but rather to social factors.

Sadly, the South African beach—is less than where solitude feels less like a luxury and more like an open invitation to criminals with violent tendencies. Boet, ever the cautious adventurer, had thus decided it is wise if he waits for reinforcements before daring to set foot on the sand. Enter his underweight twin, dragging a ball and chain in tow (me). With this ragtag group assembled, Boet finally feels secure enough to stake his claim on the beach, confident that our presence will terrify all but the foolhardiest of miscreants. Clearly, criminals have a built-in fear of sarcasm and poor life decisions.

Armed with this crowd driven bravery, we make our way to the stunning beach—a dreamy expanse of golden sand and crystal-clear water as well as a dead seal.

This trip now deserves a special mention. No this isn't just any fishing trip to the shore; this is the grand debut of Boet’s latest acquisition: a fishing rod so extravagantly priced that it makes the idea of eating fish and chips for every meal until the end of time seem like sound financial planning. And because one exorbitant rod isn’t enough, we’ve also brought its equally overpriced sibling. Two rods, one fishing license, and a gaggle of buckets and cooler boxes later, we set off.

Now, when I say, "set off," I mean we commence what feels like an expedition across the Sahara Desert's stunt double. Di, proving she’s the brains of the group, wisely stays behind to "guard the camper"—which she does by engulfing it in what can only be described as a tactical smokescreen. Whether this is meant to deter thieves or simply confuse them, we’ll never know.

Finally, panting and puffing we arrive on the beach, where Boet channels his inner Jacques Cousteau. With the poise of a seasoned angler and the intensity of a chess grandmaster, he surveys the vast expanse of ocean, ready to outwit his prey. "Quiet," he demands, as he summons every ounce of his mental energy to decipher where the fish might be lurking. The suspense is palpable. Somewhere, a seagull crackles in the distance, clearly unimpressed. In the frothing chaos of the surf mullets swim visibly in the clear azure blue waves.

I decide to flee the grim fate awaiting the innocent sand prawns and tiny fish Boet plans to use as bait. I dash into the sea, to frolic with the mullet, partly to escape the carnage and partly to question my life choices—because, really, how did I end up here. Eventually the smell of freshly grilled skin, mine, drives me back to the brave anglers, tirelessly working the pounding waves, to retrieve my top and sunscreen to find hubby has smugly reeled in his second catch, and due to this fish being the correct size I am forced to view Boet killing it like a seasoned contestant in an imaginary fishing Olympics. The race is on and Hubby reels in another and then another fish. By now I am viewing the tails buried in the sand with the same trepidation one reserves for spiders in your closet. Surely I venture we have now massacred enough of the piscine population. Apparently not. Hubby now bored comes for a walk while Boet tries to reclaim his fame.

Alas, Boet’s fishing prowess managed to rival a beginner’s guide to catching air. Clutching the unlucky fish, we are forced to return to the camp by Di sending irate texts about herself being attacked by hordes of people back at the camper. I run back to add aid, while the boys pack up and leisurely follow. Fortunately, Di’s hoards turn out to be four gents drinking beer in front of her and my spirited help is not required. Lucky for everyone concerned as I am panting and my heart is about to do some jogging outside my chest, Worse news follows apparently the snacks from earlier on have been less than health giving. In other words, she wants ablutions, that are not public and toilet paper with some urgency. Boet is dejected, Hubby is elated.

As night mercifully falls, the relentless symphony of juvenile screams finally subsides, and we can almost hear ourselves think again. We gather around the braai, where Boet has lovingly tended to the fish like it’s a prized art installation. The smoky, mouth-watering aroma fills the air, and our happy conversation hums along, accompanied by the soft crackle of the fire. Bliss, right?

Wrong!

Enter our fellow camper, shuffling over with the gravitas of someone delivering a royal decree. “Excuse me,” they announce with a tone that could stop a charging rhino, “you’ll need to laugh quietly—it’s now 8 pm.” Ah, yes, because nothing screams ‘wilderness adventure’ like enforcing a curfew on joy. Apparently, laughter after sundown is the camping equivalent of hosting a rave in a library.

We pause, blinking in stunned silence, as if we’ve just been told the moon is made of cheese. Boet stifles a laugh, I bite my tongue, and somewhere, the fish on the braai sighs in resignation. We mutter our apologies, and the camper retreats, satisfied that order has been restored. It’s official: even the wild feels more domesticated than this campsite. Quietly, of course. Wouldn’t want to disrupt the vibe.

The next morning, we’re jolted awake by what can only be described as the soundtrack to the apocalypse—an ear-splitting cacophony that sends campers scrambling out of their tents like action hero’s mid-explosion. Armed with whatever “weapons” they can find (read: tent poles and, for some reason, a plastic spatula), they look ready to defend their beloved coolers and folding chairs from what they can only assume are the hounds of hell.

The source of the chaos? None other than our dear, joy-siphoning complaining camper, who has decided to pack up his rig with all the grace of a bull in a China shop. Enter the movers—mechanical demons shrieking at a pitch so high it could summon every dog in a five-mile radius. As the noise pierces through the campsite, campers abandon their heroic stances, retreating back to their tents, defeated.

Naturally, this is the exact moment I dash out of the camper, equal parts curious and mildly homicidal, and march toward the commotion. Through gritted teeth, I demand to know why the car hasn’t been reversed into position next to the camper. Before I can even finish my sentence, the camper’s wife offers the pièce de résistance of camping logic: “Oh,” she says, with the kind of cheer that belongs in a noisy party setting, “he can’t reverse.”

Cue her husband, blissfully oblivious to the chaos unfolding around him, barrelling even further down the muddy trail in a truly bewildering attempt to transform the ordeal into something resembling an endurance challenge. Behind him, the caravan trudged along at a pace that could make a snail look like a sprinter, wailing with the unholy racket of a thousand tortured banshees. Every bump, every splatter of mud, seemed to amplify the symphony of misery.

After a soul-crushing fifteen minutes—an eternity when set to the soundtrack of demonic screeching—the dynamic (and very non-reversing) duo miraculously managed to escape. Caravan hitched; they drove off into the sunrise with the kind of triumph only marginal competence can provide.

Exhausted and barely speaking, we basked in the sweet, sweet sound of silence. It was fleeting, but glorious. And as we inhaled the peace, we did what any sane humans would—turned to breakfast. Nothing soothes frayed nerves and questionable driving decisions like a good coffee, a sizzling pan and the faint hope of a day that might, just might, go according to plan.

Alas, Boet is now driven by a mission as noble as it was absurd, so after breakfast and a paddle through the flooded ablution blocks we set off once again for the sea. Boet, still nursing the sting of yesterday’s lukewarm fishing performance, declared he would reclaim his honour—or die trying. And so, like overburdened sherpas on an expedition nobody signed up for, we shuffled across what felt like an endless expanse of sand, dragging cooler boxes, rods, buckets, and dignity behind us.

The sand stretches on forever, each grain mocking us silently. Boet’s resolve seemed unwavering—though perhaps it was just the stubbornness of someone who’d paid a fortune for a rod that was starting to resemble an overpriced walking stick. Finally, after what felt like traversing half the Sahara, Boet cast his line with the determined energy of a warrior charging into battle.

And then, as if the sea decided to throw him a pity party, success! Boet reeled in his catch, a triumph that could only be described as disproportionate to the effort exerted. He held up his prize with a grin that radiated vindication, and we all cheered, took photos —partly out of joy for him, but mostly out of relief that the epic trek across the sand had paid off. Victory for Boet, and slightly less sand in our shoes. The day felt borderline heroic.

Boet spent the rest of the day and the evening defending his single catch as "lean, mean, and packed with protein" to anyone who’d listen (and some who wouldn’t). Within hours I felt a pang of desire for “who wants to be a millionaire!”

# Section 2 Iron Chef Chronicles:

## The Culinary Maverick

Both Boet and his twin believe they are cooking geniuses.

Boet is the more a serious chef to his brother. In his kitchen stands a lovely four plate electric stove, and in the middle of the kitchen, artistically arranged so you can continually trip over it, is the camping gas cooker. Now the average South African needs gas because the electricity supply in this country is what you could call erratic, the non-charitable may call it something else. However, there is a range of upmarket well priced gas cookers which are not lethal death traps for the population. But Boet believes his optimally positioned gas cooker is equipped with superior cooking power (as well as tripping ability) to my super-efficient three plate gas cooker nicely out of the way of the unwary.

Boet unlike me loves his camping gas cooker. It is his precious. If the house caught fire he would rescue it before finding if his beloved spouse of forty plus year had made it out of the fiery furnace. His passion makes me feel sad that I have no such affection. Mine is simply another appliance. Probably my abused and underappreciated appliance should start support group for abused and unloved gas cookers.

Boet watches cooking shows in the same manner I quaff wine. Fortunately for my marriage and sanity his brother believes cooking shows are for sissies who don’t know how to cook. Hubby is the genius cook and has perfected poached eggs, cheese sauce, omelettes, sausage and mash. In his mind that covers the culinary world for a week and needs no improvement. This proved to be his downfall.

When fish is caught then it must be cooked. Hubby now adopted the title of the “Tartare Sauce Sommelier” as his culinary skills were now forced into the spotlight. The challenge: create a tartare sauce that would make Poseidon himself throw down his trident in admiration.

Hubby had approached the tartare task with a fiery passion that could rival the campfire itself. Following a heartfelt consultation with his beloved wife, who wisely reminded him, “Remember, we’re feeding people, not frightening them,” he gathered his ingredients: mayo, pickles, and... oh no. Where was the lemon juice?

The answer, as it turned out, lay in Boet's unapologetically smug hands. He had swiped the last primrose yellow orb from the vegetable basket and squeezed it triumphantly over his fish magnifique. The audacity! The citrus scandal! Hubby glared at Boet, who was humming contentedly, blissfully unaware of the culinary chaos he had caused. The atmosphere lost ten degrees.

“Boet!” Hubby exclaimed; voice tinged with melodrama. “That lemon was supposed to be the heart of my sauce, the soul of my masterpiece!”

Boet glanced at him, unbothered. “Relax, bru. Just use vinegar or something.”

“Vinegar?” Hubby muttered, affronted. “Vinegar cannot capture the nuance, the vibrancy, the zestiness that lemon juice brings!” He turned back to his ingredients, expression now resembling that of a hero grappling with destiny. The world had tumbled into shards and now he alone would have to rescue it.

Under a frosty glare he substituted vinegar, added a pinch of sugar, and whispered a silent apology to the sauce gods as he whisked his creation into existence. Was it perfect? No. Was it edible? Debatable. However, Hubby held his head high, announcing, “Ladies and gentlemen, what you taste tonight is not defeat, but true South African resilience!”

Di had always considered positioned herself as a seafood enthusiast—or at least, that's what she'd told people. But tonight, as the aroma of baking fish wafted through the air, mingling with the tragic scent of unpeeled vegetables and gem squash steamed into total submission, something deep inside her rebelled.

She sniffed once. Then again. Her expression darkened like a storm rolling in over the ocean.

“I can’t,” she announced abruptly, her voice cutting through the chatter of the kitchen like a knife through a raw onion. “I simply can’t eat seafood anymore. I've... gone off it.”

The Boet turned to her in synchronized bafflement, frozen mid-air. There was an audible pause before someone dared to ask, “Gone off it? You used to love fish?

“Never,” Di confirmed, with the conviction of someone who just discovered an allergy. “I need chicken. Breast. Preferably grilled. Maybe spicy.”

Boet is a weary soul with questionable culinary dreams now stared at her as though she’d demanded a three-course Michelin-star meal in the middle of the wilderness. “Di, we don’t have chicken defrosted. This is a fish night.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate, isn’t it?” Di replied briskly, turning her focus to her steamed gem squash replete with its seeds glistening in the light. Defeated by the superior feminine logic Boet approached the freezer, wrenching open the freezer door. With the determination of someone braving the Antarctic tundra he dived into the depths. His mission? Retrieve the lone, frostbitten piece of chicken that had been forgotten in the icy depths for what felt like centuries.

With triumph in his eyes, Boet plucked the chicken from its icy prison and laid it on the counter, treating it as though he had unearthed buried treasure. Ignoring the faint freezer burn scars on its surface, he grabbed the nearest spice bottle and gave it a vigorous shake. No measuring, no thinking—just pure, unadulterated chaos. The spices rained down on the chicken like a confetto of flavour, or perhaps misfortune, depending on how you looked at it.

“Happy now, Di?” he called out with a theatrical flair as he slid the chicken into the pan. The sizzle sounded like applause—or possibly the cries of protest from the chicken itself.

Di, observing from ten metres away, raised an eyebrow. “You missed a spot,” she pointed out.

Boet, unfazed, waved the spice bottle in the air again, sprinkling another burst onto the sizzling chicken with the same nonchalance as a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. “There you go—masterpiece!” he declared.

As the chicken cooked, its aroma mingled with the lingering scent of fish and steamed vegetables, creating a culinary symphony that might generously be described as... experimental. But Boet didn’t care. He was a man on a mission—husband, chef, and spice artist.

As the we tucked into our delicious fish and less delicious vegetables, Di spent the evening elaborating on her sudden seafood aversion, citing philosophical reasons and a vague mention of mercury levels, while her portion of the fish sat untouched on plate, slowly congealing in despair.

Boet, biting into his fish magnifique, added some tartare sauce and tasted it. Looking at his twin he said condescendingly “Tastes like too much vinegar to me.”

## Flame-Kissed Breakfast: The Frittata That Survived

When we visit the Garden Route, naturally, we crash at Boet's place. Not that he minds, of course—what’s a little invasion of his peace and quiet compared to the joy of hosting his beloved twin? Di on the other hand may have a slightly different opinion. While Boet is living the dream of early wake-up calls and perpetual house guests. Di is slightly less enthusiastic about us invading her space and dragging her out of the comfort zone her veranda offers for smoking and doing word search.

Di’s lack of sympathy for our early-bird routine is glaringly obvious. Being up and dressed by 7 a.m.—a time she considers borderline criminal—is enough to spark her intense frustration. In her world, such an ungodly hour seems designed to torment retirees, triggering a wave of defiance that rivals any rebellion in history. Apparently, in the world of retirees, even 9 a.m. qualifies as an ungodly hour better suited for night owls.

This morning began as it always does at Boet's senior citizen sanctuary, where we play the role of alarm clocks that no one asked for as we made our selves a cup of coffee.

Boet staggered out of the bedroom, casting a disdainful glance at the weather, which had apparently RSVP’d “no” to the holiday spirit. “I will make frittata,” he announced, with all the gravitas of a Cordon Bleu chef briefing a room of trembling kitchen interns.

David, in all his culinary wisdom, blinked in visible confusion. Boet, clearly unsatisfied with his audience’s lack of reverence, launched into an impromptu lecture about the art of frittata-making. Meanwhile, I glanced at my dear husband with a mixture of pity and second-hand embarrassment, silently mourning his tragic, vocabulary-deficient attempt at sounding sophisticated.

Boet’s approach to making a frittata was nothing short of theatrical. With all the flair of a cooking show host, he plucked a bowl from the cupboard and began cracking eggs. Each egg landed with a dramatic splash, flying through the air as though the yolks themselves were applauding his effort.

“Whisking is an art,” Boet declared to Hubby in particular, wielding the whisk like it was a baton. Flourished with enough enthusiasm to send egg whites flying across the counter, he gave the mixture a whirl that could only be described as excessively passionate. Next came the ingredients—a medley of vegetables, cheese, and whatever vaguely edible scraps he could rummage from the fridge. He tossed them in with the reckless abandon of a man who believed seasoning was a suggestion, not a rule. "You can’t rush perfection," he proclaimed as he sprinkled a suspiciously large handful of herbs into the mix, ignoring the fact that half of them were wilting.

Then came the cooking. Boet poured the egg mixture into the pan on his gas stove, Bending over the gas stove in the centre of his kitchen with the solemnity of a baptism as he turned the heat up to "fiery inferno." Watching him flip the frittata was like witnessing an Olympic gymnast attempt a triple backflip—it was bold, borderline reckless, and you weren’t quite sure if it was going to end in glory or disaster.

At home, we have a cute little culinary torch—an elegant tool for torching crème brûlée and delicately browning dishes. It’s tiny, precise, and distinctly non-threatening. Boet, however, prefers to dial up the drama. His version? Oh, just your everyday *industrial blowtorch*. You know, the kind typically used for melting steel, repairing plumbing, or possibly launching small rockets. Naturally, it emerges from his workshop, because why wouldn’t you use something capable of welding pipes to crisp an innocent breakfast? Subtlety, thy name is *not* Boet.

The pièce de résistance was, of course, the blowtorch. Forget subtle browning techniques—Boet's industrial torch was a weapon of mass destruction, belching flames at his creation as if he were forging a sword rather than crisping the top of a breakfast dish. As I watched him wield his fiery monstrosity, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of admiration—or was its fear? Either way, breakfast was going to be unforgettable... for better or worse.

The frittata emerged charred and triumphant, a battle-scarred hero that had survived Boet’s culinary crusade. Boet, ever the performer, plated it with an exaggerated flourish and announced, “Voila! Breakfast is served.” Somewhere, a Michelin-God surely felt a mysterious sense of unease.

Di had fruit salad and yogurt.

## Firth of Frugal Flames

Boet and Hubby, relish their 50% tartan-wrapped souls, and wear their Scottish pride on their sleeves—or rather, on their braai habits..

Allow me to enlighten you about the sacred braai in South Africa. A braai in South Africa a sacred South African ritual that separates the amateurs from the true pyromaniacs A proper South African braai doesn’t just cook meat; it devours entire forests of wood with ecosystems of charcoal. True Braai Masters display their devotion by stockpiling enough firewood to fuel the entire Scandinavian peninsula through an apocalyptic winter next to the braai area. It's all about grandeur, flames, and smoke signals visible from space.

But for Boet and Hubby? They’re clutching their wallets like they’re guarding the Crown Jewels. Paying for wood that literally goes up in smoke? The horror! It’s practically a crime against their Scottish DNA. Paying for fire? Not on their watch.

Hubby, bless him, takes the frugality crown. At home, we’re wielding a monster gas braai- a behemoth of culinary convenience. This isn't just a braai; it's a high-tech, stainless steel shrine to excess. It comes equipped with more knobs, removable plates, and dials than a spaceship, each one controlling a feature that nobody asked for, but everyone pretends to understand. Cooking on it feels less like braaiing and more like conducting an orchestra of sizzling haute cuisine, each burner representing a different section. There are thermometers and browning plates, rocks and pizza stones. We do not need the romance of fire to hide the unappetising mess from a real braai, our food is cooked to the right temperature in for convenience and has zero charcoal stains?

Admittedly it doesn’t have the drama of real flames or the crackling of wood, but there’s no chance of accidentally summoning the fire brigade, though occasionally we might need a technician on hand to fix whatever mysterious button you just pressed.

A monster gas braai is the definitive statement of convenience over culture, a subtle way of saying, “Yes, I love to braai, but I also love not doing any of the actual work.” It's the braai equivalent of driving a sports car in a traffic jam: excessive, impractical, and absolutely magnificent. But let’s not kid ourselves: showing up to a campsite with a gas braai is like arriving at a rugby match dressed as a ballerina—an unforgettable spectacle, but utterly unacceptable. Unless, of course, it’s a skottel braai. Then suddenly, gas becomes vaguely acceptable provided, of course, it’s strictly before midday. Because everyone knows the magical, unspoken rule of braai etiquette: gas in the morning is forgivable, but by afternoon, it’s an abomination punishable by side-eyes and whispered judgment.

Let me introduce the skottel braai. It’s a monstrous sloped frying pan affair slapped onto a gas cylinder, creating a free-for-all where sausages mingle awkwardly with scrambled eggs, and pancakes brazenly invade boerewors territory. It’s a vegetarian nightmare! It's like your kitchen got dragged out into the bush for an identity crisis. However, in South Africa, it is part of the culinary scene with the strict proviso. A skottel braai before midday for a breakfast or even a brunch is acceptable as it shows you’re a cool outdoorsy type. Gas any time after? Blasphemy of the highest order. Braaiing on a skottel after the magical hour would open you up to the ultimate braai insult- “you cook like an Englishman.”

When you go camping post midday the average South African pyromaniac is busy crafting bonfires that could summon Martians, but Boet and Hubby are clinging to their wallets like a dragon guarding its hoard.

Boet, ever so slightly less cautious with his wallet and wanting to fit in with his camper, occasionally treats the braai to a small packet of wood and some charcoal briquettes. Firelighters, however, are normally forgotten? Why invest in something that’s destined to go up in flames? Instead, he’ll stand over the stubborn pile of wood and charcoal, willing it to ignite through sheer determination. Add a gust of wind, a stray spark, or divine intervention, and voila—you’ve got fire. Who needs firelighters when you’ve got patience and an iron will?

Enter his sister-in-law, an Afrikaans speaking vegetarian paragon of braai etiquette. After more than 40 years of camping with these two, I am also an expert of strategic brilliance. The grandkids’ Afrikaans school fundraiser, selling firelighters in packs of ten, is clearly the most appropriate weapon that can pry open their doting grandad’s wallet.

And so, Boet and Hubby continue their braai adventures—proudly Scottish, hilariously frugal with firelighters from an Afrikaans primary school lighting up the night, while proving that you don’t need an entire forest to cook a chop. Just a touch of stubbornness, a dash of ingenuity, and an unwavering refusal to part with your precious rands when camping.

There is however one weakness for Boet at home. It is his Webber braai. A braai on wheels. Genius, because nothing says “authentic braai” like the ability to roll it onto the porch to avoid a drizzle. The Weber braai is a declaration of, “As a South African I enjoy braaiing, but I also don’t want to put in any effort, thank you very much.” Now there is a warning here. If you ever take a Webber braai camping, even the zebras’s would laugh at you.

Thus, Boet’s expensive quirky contraption masquerades as a braai while secretly operating as an oversized domed oven on wheels. Its appearance alone is a statement—part spaceship, part Victorian chamber pot. For a Webber braai there are no majestic open flames and primal smoke of a traditional braai, the Weber opts for a more subdued approach. You light your coals, slap a lid on it, and voilà—a braai experience so tame that it borders on cooking in the oven. No sparks flying, no wood crackling, and definitely no neighbors calling the fire department.

The Webber is geared for the upmarket nerd. The manufacturers sell the basic braai- 3 poles and the Victorian chamber pot, but then they lash on the essential accessories- because like our gas behemoth, the Weber braai comes with more gadgets than a Swiss army knife, turning your once simple meat-and-fire operation into a laboratory experiment. Thermometers, racks, grids, pizza stones—it’s like assembling flat-pack furniture every time you cook.

Boet’s Weber, a gleaming black dome of braai ambition, sits proudly in front of his monstrous four-by-four truck, a duo that practically screams, “I’m here to conquer meat and terrain!” Naturally, both are carefully hidden away from Di, who glares at them as though they’re personal insults to her sense of refinement. But let the visitors arrive, and oh, how the tables turn! Suddenly, Di transforms into the unofficial ambassador of the Weber braai and its wonders. Salad-making is her true culinary domain (because leafy greens rarely require fire or intimidation), and she thrives in the art of hosting. The Weber becomes a symbol of social mastery—Di doesn’t need to braai; she just needs to talk about it. Guests marvel at the contraption and its promise of tender steaks, flame seared pizzas and chicken marinaded in a magic potion while Di takes full credit for having something so impressive within the vicinity of her retirement home. Her salad accompanies the spectacle, as though lettuce was the missing piece of the perfect braai experience.

It was when Boet got his Pizza stone that the Webber was elevated on its pinnacle of performance. The legendary pizza stone was an accessory so elite it elevated the Weber to its final form—a braai transcending meat and entering the sacred realm of gourmet.

As a vegetarian, my pizza creations are a delightful symphony of simplicity—tomato, cheese, and mushrooms, a classic trio of flavors. Occasionally, I let my adventurous spirit shine with pineapple, a move so bold that it sparks debates at the United Nations. Alas there’s Di, standing firm in her unshakable belief that pineapple on pizza is a crime against humanity, possibly punishable by exile. Her addiction is enough garlic to repel vampires and possibly all forms of human interaction for the next 48 hours. Her dedication to this cause is almost admirable, but even the pungent garlic takeover could not help when we stood together against the ultimate pizza horror.

Boet and Hubby’s preference was Capers and Anchovies! Surely the boys had conspired to create the most polarizing pizza toppings known to humankind. Salty, pungent, and unapologetically in-your-face, their choices are the culinary equivalent of watching a blood ridden drama unfold on reality television—you just can’t look or smell away.

Di and I, the unyielding guardians of our precious pizzas, stood firm against the anchovy apocalypse. Forcing those salty atrocities to be cooked last felt like a brilliant move—well, in theory. But alas, anchovies are not mere toppings; they are stealthy invaders, their aroma infiltrating every corner of the eating domain. That anchovy stench launched a full-scale olfactory assault, wrapping itself around the air like a cling wrap. Every bite of my delightful, pineapple-topped masterpiece carried the ghostly whiff of Boet and Hubby’s fishy abominations mixed with Di’s garlic bulb-induced bliss. The resulting flavor slapped taste buds, danced on tongues, and lingered long after the meal ended like an unwelcome ghost . It’s as though the anchovies were taunting me, reminding me that, in the end, they always win.

Even the Weber pizza stone can’t beat Team Anchovy.

## Camper Cuisine

South Africa known as the land of sunshine and safari until spring rolls around in September and we decide to camp with Boet. Then Mother Nature cruelly decides to remind you she’s full of surprises. If you go camping you now have to expect the unexpected. Snow in spring? Absolutely. Toss a little frost on the flowers for dramatic effect, maybe add some torrential rain showers. It’s the kind of weather that makes packing for a camping trip feel like a game of roulette—you might need sunscreen, or you might need snow boots. Who knows? Not us.

Adding to this problem is the fact our camper is a touch small. In fact, the camper isn’t even big enough to bring dreams let alone a full range of clothing. Forget luxuries I am normally debating whether deodorant or an extra pair of socks makes the cut. Shoes? Yup maybe one pair each so we can be wearing the same pair every day, regardless of mud, rain, or unfortunate encounters with enthusiastic wildlife.

When the weather turns nasty then you realise that camping means a campsite lottery, where you gamble with your sanity. When the weather turns vicious you’ll find us all huddling in Boet’s camper like survivors of some great arctic expedition. Why? Because Boet’s camper is the *Ritz* of the camping world, complete with a heater and an indoor stove, aka the holy grail of warmth and civilization. Meanwhile, our fair-weather camper sits there with its exposed kitchen, laughing cruelly as we attempt to cook in gale-force winds or snow flurries. Sometimes our campsite is more of a live-action survival documentary. Thank goodness for Boet’s rolling fortress of cozy and by cozy I mean really really cramped!

On this bitter night we were all in Boet’s camper—a true testament to human ingenuity and stubborn determination in the face of gale-force winds and polar bear-worthy temperatures. While the storm raged on outside, the camper became a cramped refuge of questionable ergonomics and comedic chaos.

Di, the undisputed queen of comfort, claimed the bed with the kind of authority reserved for royalty, sprawled out as though she were posing for an oil painting titled *"The Art of Leisure."* Meanwhile, the rest of we perched awkwardly on the driver and passenger seats, necks craned like flamingos trying to hold a conversation with Boet, the fearless commander of the two-plate gas stove. There he was, pots and pans flying, wielding utensils with the skill and focus of a Michelin chef.

Occasionally came the fridge operation. Boet would heroically shove Di aside to climb onto the bed, because apparently the only way to access this treasure chest of chilled wonders was to perform a dramatic dive, roll out the fridge from its hiding spot, and rummage through its icy depths like an archaeologist uncovering long-lost relics. The lid would close with a triumphant thud, followed by the equally theatrical rolling-back manoeuvre. It was practically Olympic-level camper gymnastics, and Boet, clearly, deserved a gold medal for his efforts.

For many hamburgers and hot dogs are an easy dish but in our case came with a twist that could rival any gourmet kitchen. Boet, of course, scoffs at the idea of merely slapping an underdone patty on a roll and calling it a day. Oh no, in Boet’s world, every meal is a tailored masterpiece. It’s practically a personalized dining experience at the most exclusive (and cramped) restaurant on wheels.

Di, ever the chicken devotee, has her plate carefully curated to ensure not a hint of pork crosses her path. I, the vegetarian, naturally claim the moral high ground with a virtuous veggie creation, because who needs meat when mushrooms and tomatoes reign supreme? Then there’s Boet and Hubby, delightfully embracing their carnivorous chaos with chili cheese-infused Russians—because why settle for plain hot dogs when you can have a mouthful of fiery, cheesy decadence wrapped in sausage form carried by us all the way from Gauteng.

The camper kitchen became Boet's theatrical arena, where every movement is a masterclass in culinary drama. Lettuce is pampered like a celebrity at a spa, rinsed and primped to perfection before the careful placement on our rolls. Tomatoes meet their fate under Boet's exacting blade, each slice a tribute to his unwavering precision. Meanwhile, my humble vegetarian cardboard concoction gets its token slice of cheese lovingly slapped on top—because even bad food deserves a little hope.

Then there’s the onions—oh, the onions. Their sizzling serenade fills the camper with an aroma so intoxicating it makes everyone’s mouth water, no matter how hard they’re trying to be impolite about my lacklustre veggie experiment. It’s sensory warfare in the best possible way, orchestrated by Boet, the maestro of mealtime mayhem. Who knew a two-plate gas stove could set the stage for such a feast?

The rolls are now cut, ready for the fillings. First, there’s the classic tomato sauce, strutting onto the scene with its sweet tang, followed by chutney, the wildcard that adds a mysterious punch. Mayonnaise swoops in next, attempting to bring some cooling calm to the chaos. And then, there’s the showstopper—something so blisteringly spicy, it feels like it was brewed by dragons. One drop of this magical concoction, and your taste buds are ready to stage a protest.

Meanwhile, the melamine plates make their grand appearance, a staple of camping elegance. Durable, unbreakable, and unapologetically practical, they might not win any style awards, but they’re the perfect canvas for Boet’s culinary creations. Us ladies are served first, of course—a moment of calm, before Boet turns to his pièce de resistance—the sausages.

These are no ordinary sausages, mind you; they are treated with the reverence befitting culinary royalty. Lovingly fried to golden perfection, each one is gently nestled into its long roll with a care and precision that borders on artistry.

Onions are piled high like a proud mountain of caramelized goodness, their aroma a siren call to anyone within a ten-mile radius. Mustard, tomato sauce, and, of course, the fiery concoction known as "blistering hot stuff" are strategically drizzled over the top. This is no haphazard assembly—oh no—this is sausage architecture, a structural masterpiece designed for maximum flavour impact.

Boet’s creations are pure, untainted brilliance. Lettuce and tomato? Those are banished from this sacred process, deemed unworthy of sullying the integrity of his sausage masterpiece. Only the bold and unapologetic ingredients are permitted, creating a symphony of heat, tang, and savoury perfection. And as Boet triumphantly serves up his works of art, one can’t help but wonder if there should be applause.

It’s hamburgers and hot dogs, sure, but elevated to a hilariously precise symphony of flavours—and all while battling polar temperatures and cramped quarters. If nothing else, it’s dinner with flair!

## Great Spreadable Debate of the Century

Di—once a formidable force in the kitchen during her youth—has evolved into a culinary enigma. A combination of age, diabetes, and what one could generously call "focused simplification" has pared her repertoire down to two reliable dishes: salad, which she wields like a badge of honour, and chicken pasta, her magnum opus. Despite this limited portfolio, she has declared herself the *Nutritionist of the Year*, dispensing dietary wisdom with the confidence of someone who hasn’t let the minor detail of formal education—or, let’s be honest, actual expertise—get in the way of her crusade for others healthy eating.

Di approaches her greens with the precision of a jeweller crafting a masterpiece. Lettuce? A non-negotiable foundation. Spinach? Could be if still a baby. Celery? Well, celery is the strong but divisive advisor that sometimes overstays its welcome. She scatters bright tomatoes like gleaming rubies atop her creations, while thick slices of cucumber and carrot add an air of whimsy. On special occasions, when she’s feeling particularly rebellious, she might even crumble a sprinkling of feta cheese over the top. These rare moments of decadence are spoken of in hushed tones, like spotting a shooting star because Boet likes buying the creamy white cheese in his frugal Scottish way, and Boet normally does the veggie shopping when he goes to his boat in Knysna.

Di’s secret weapons-olive oil and balsamic vinegar—are ever-present, standing sentinel on her dining table. With these stalwart companions, every salad transcends its humble roots to flirt with near-gourmet territory. Guests like me admire her discipline, though privately, I am sure she stashes chocolate somewhere out of sight, a hidden treasure meant only for her.

Her disciplined façade is so convincing, you’d believe she survives solely on greens and air. That is, until you witness her devour a plate of ribs at the restaurant with an enthusiasm that defies her adamant proclamation of "not liking meat"—especially pork. “I never eat pork,” she declares between bites, her rib-covered fingers telling another story altogether.

And then there’s Boet, her culinary opposite in every way. A devoted carnivore, he dabbles in salad only as a side attraction, and even then, sparingly. He has a weakness for meat-centric dishes, which he perfects with the guidance of countless cooking shows that he watches religiously. Boet can whip up a barbecue feast that would make pitmasters weep with jealousy. Meanwhile, Di eyes his creations with the detached amusement of someone who would honestly be just as happy with an apple.

And thus, the scene was set for the Great Spreadable Debate of the Century when I, armed with Butro—the saviour of toast everywhere—dared to defy Di’s hardline stance on rock-solid butter in her kitchen. She, of course, clung to her icy convictions, butter in hand, insisting that its unyielding texture was a small price to pay for health. Margarine? A villainous impostor in her eyes.

“Do you *know* what’s in that?” she sniffed, as though Butro were a toxin and not the hero of easily spreadable breakfasts. Her tone carried the weight of a thousand unsolicited health lectures, as she eyed my piece of warm bread with barely concealed judgment. I smoothed my Butro, golden and glorious, effortlessly across my fresh bread like a smooth-talking diplomat, settling the age-old war between convenience and tradition.

“ Yes, they put the ingredients on the back.” I said taking a bite and showing her. The simplicity of my response, paired with that triumphant bite of perfectly spread yellow should have struck a blow to her carefully constructed anti-margarine stance. Di however is made of sterner stuff. As the self-appointed Nutritionist of the Year, she remained standing proudly by her butter bricks as if they were sacred relics, judging my spread with a zeal rivalling that of ancient philosophers debating the meaning of life.

"I don’t know how you ever got a Diploma in Nutrition," she scoffs, as if this qualification were something handed out to me like candy at Halloween. Her disbelief is palpable, as though the mere presence of an oil-based spread in the hallowed grounds of her kitchen has upended her carefully curated world.

Butter bricks—those unapologetically dense blocks of dairy goodness, standing firm against modern dietary nonsense. They may require a chisel or a small construction crew to tackle, but hey, they're pure, unadulterated, and more stubborn than an old farm dog. Unfortunately, the stress of ripping apart perfectly innocent bread just to spread something that scoffs at room temperature might push me to the brink of sanity, but wisely I’ve chosen peace over nutritional virtue. In my world, convenience trumps heroics.

Still, every unyielding slab of butter sparks nostalgia—hours spent on the farm, whipping cream and tossing in salt until those glorious golden slabs emerged as if we’d discovered treasure.

Di has also her unshakable cheese principle: uncoloured cheese, specifically white cheddar. I’ll admit, she’s got me there. When you’re treating yourself to a slice of cheese, why settle for golden food-coloured theatrics? White cheddar is the true gold standard, and I think my bowing to her wisdom is almost as satisfying as the cheese itself.

Di proved to be a woman of unshakable principles not just of butter but of her entire Nutritionist of the Year legacy. She has the unwavering ability to judge everyone else’s dietary choices with the precision of a laser beam. I could not help but notice this juxtaposition is further heightened by Di’s other smelly little quirk: her chain-smoking habit, which adds a delightful irony to her healthy dietary preachings to the rest of us, who don’t smoke.

Later that day while filling in her friend, delivering her gospel of health versus my dreadful dietary habits with the seriousness of a TED Talk, there she was, puffing away like a chimney in peak winter. It's hard to ignore the glorious contradiction—greens and purity on the plate, nicotine and chaos in the lungs.

When we visit the Palace of the Aged in the Garden route it’s a fascinating dynamic, watching the self-appointed Nutritionist of the Year coexist with a man whose dedication to meat, chips and fish borders on spiritual while Di is content to dispense her nutritional opinions between puffs, her hunger generally kept at bay by the satisfying crunch of a salad with maybe a piece of chicken, the temptation of chips often wins her weaker side over.

Together, Di and Boet create a comedic masterpiece of contrasts: the queen of greens and the king of carnivores, each steadfast in their domain, yet hilariously intertwined. Their kitchen may be small, but the personalities and contradictions within it are boundless. Dining at their table is less of a meal and more of a front-row seat to one of life’s great culinary sitcoms. I wonder if her salad comes seasoned with hypocrisy?

However, there is one time that Di does not come up tops and that is when Hubby takes the culinary wheel. Normally this is when we go camping with them. Hubby loves to cook and when we are camping then Hubby steps in, armed with his "greatest hits" of culinary mastery—all meticulously perfected, and all proudly devoid of vegetables. It’s a sibling tradition, evidently, to sideline anything green and leafy as if it’s part of a culinary conspiracy.

The distinction, though, is Hubby's relationship with salad is a deep, unwavering disdain that borders on personal offense. While his brother might simply ignore salad's existence, Hubby takes it a step further, looking at a bowl of greens like it’s actively plotting against his happiness. The man respects his proteins, he cherishes his carbs, but a salad? That’s where he draws the line. It's a strong stance and after a dinner with salad as an option, he reaches the camping boundary of his patience. Butter tests his patience too. Hubby is made of far sterner stuff than Boet, despite his fawning where his brother is concerned, and health does not trump convenience in our marriage.

Thus, the scene was set a kitchen coup, and Hubby was at the helm. After a relentless salad masquerading as a “meal,” his patience had officially run out. Greens were banished with the decisiveness of a medieval king exiling traitors, and he strode into the camping kitchen area with the determination of a man reclaiming his culinary throne.

Then came the dish—a masterpiece to erase all memory of rabbit food. Pots clanged, pans sizzled, and Hubby worked with an intensity that made you wonder if he was auditioning for a cooking reality show. Pasta took centre stage, seasoned with the kind of enthusiasm that only comes from salad-induced rebellion, while carb-heavy bread and butro joined in the fray like loyal soldiers. Vegetables ? Only those that could be fried or hidden under cheese made the cut.

And so, the lone sliced tomato perched atop the macaroni was officially recategorized and crowned as "the vegetable"—a heroic, if somewhat reluctant, symbol of healthy eating in Hubby's otherwise veggie-free culinary empire. It sat there, bold, and unapologetic, like a diplomatic olive branch between carbs, and the concept of nutrition. Next to the bowl was butro, in its green container.

“Honey” I said in my sweetest voice. “Us sugar sensitive persons need some greens.”

Hubby gestured to the green butro container and said “Greens! And vegetables!” pointing at the tomatoes hidden under a generous layer of yellow bubbling cheese.! ”Who knew a tomato could carry so much weight (figuratively, of course)? In this kitchen, it wasn’t just a garnish—it was a statement.

## Campfire Breakfast Chronicles

When we go out camping I have one instruction of what to bring from the Soul of healthy eating AKA Hubby. Before I let you in to this secret let me delve into the sibling rivalry between Boet and Hubby.

Throughout Boet’s life, hubby would eat his sweets .In fact Boet still recalls when Hubby in the pram in which the two faced each other how he was traumatised by his elder brother of two minutes.

The sibling rivalry began before they could even walk. Picture it: two cherubic boys, dressed identically in matching outfits, perched in a twin pram like the stars of a baby fashion show. Boet, the angelic one, contentedly sucking on his dainty dummy, which was pinned to him with the precision of a royal medal. Hubby, on the other hand, was already showing signs of being the family’s resident troublemaker. His dummy? A solid rubber fortress, because he had a habit of biting holes in anything less durable.

Hubby wasn’t satisfied with his indestructible option. Oh no, he had his sights set on Boet’s delicate dummy—the forbidden fruit of the pram. With the cunning of a tiny mastermind, he would reach across, grab the ribbon attached to Boet’s dummy, and yank it closer. Then, with the precision of a baby shark, he’d sink his teeth into the prized possession, leaving Boet in a state of outraged betrayal. The pram became a battlefield, Boet’s cries echoing through the house as Hubby grinned like a pint-sized villain. And thus, the sibling dynamic was set: Boet, the innocent victim, and Hubby, the relentless food thief.

Throughout Boet’s life, Easter was a series of painful experiences. It was at this period his sweets were less of a treat and more of a survival challenge. Boet savored his treats, eating them slowly with relish. Hubby devoured them and went on searching for more. No matter how ingeniously Boet hid them—under mattresses, behind books, even in the depths of his cricket bag, his devious older brother would inevitably uncover them like a sugar-obsessed detective. Boet’s carefully stashed treasures were nothing more than fleeting victories, as Hubby would swoop in, devour the loot, and leave behind the empty wrappers as a mocking reminder of his triumph. Boet’s sweet stash wasn’t just candy—it was a constant lesson in sibling strategy and disappointment. The man never stood a chance!

It is the great divide between Boet and Hubby and nothing short of cruel comedy. While Boet can merely *glance* in the general direction of a cake and mysteriously “blossom” into a softer shape, Hubby sits smugly across the table, devouring sweets like they’re part of his workout regimen and remaining miraculously slim and trim.

It’s like Hubby’s body operates on its own set of physics, where calories vanish into the void, never to be seen again. Meanwhile, Boet is left waging a losing battle against the dessert aisle at every turn. If science hasn’t figured it out yet, I think I may have cracked the case. Hubby devours sweets with reckless abandon, and somehow, Boet ends up paying the price—like a bizarre karmic exchange of calories. Hubby savors every bite guilt-free, while Boet is feeling the effects. Forget sharing emotions; these twins seem to be sharing *metabolisms.* It’s a conspiracy worthy of its own study.

I do try to be sensitive to the problems of weight gain especially since I suffer from it too. When I pack for our combined camping expeditions I try to go for low carb options. There's one area I can't manage to do this with low carbs.-Breakfast rusks!

Breakfast rusks are the kryptonite of low-carb intentions. They are the non-negotiable addition to any camping experience. They sit there, smugly sweet and rock-hard, daring you to resist them. With the structural integrity of a piece of driftwood, rusks laugh in the face of teeth, challenging even the most determined bite. But drop them into tea or coffee, and their true nature is revealed—a soggy transformation that leaves a sludge at the bottom of your cup. Despite their stubborn carb content and their ability to haunt my soul, rusks somehow remain untouchable. The rusk reigns supreme and must be packed.

So, it was when we were in Storm’s River in the Western cape on a chilly February morning and as usual the four of us sat in our deckchairs gazing out at the glorious waves smashing big stones into smaller ones with the obligatory cup of coffee in hand and our rusks being dunked with precision. However Rusks have a side effect, they create a deeper hunger for real food and today was no exception.

Boet was considering the options, egg on toast, bacon and egg, bacon tomatoes and egg. It was a tricky question as we dunked and slurped. Did we want the dishes to wash or didn’t we rang in Di and I’s mind, while the men wrestled with the bacon problem. The situation in the middle east never had so much concentration, Economies were run with less agonising.

Di the master of dispersing a problem came up with her solution, “I’ll have yogurt and fruit!” Her stance was uncompromising as she went off to smoke another cancer stick and go to the ablutions.

The men looked affronted, clearly this option was not in their box of solutions. With a sigh Boet got up to chop some fruit into the yogurt.

“Do you want some Gail?’ he offered. his voice kind as he scooped yogurt into the dented container of plain yogurt he'd just wrestled from the fridge. I glanced at it—this bleak, joyless tub of cultured misery—and felt my soul quietly sigh.

“Please, fruit but no yogurt,” I replied with diplomatic restraint.

Hubby, ever the lover of all things savoury and butter-drenched, looked at the yogurt and fruit combo as though it were a biohazard. There was a moment of shared understanding between us: this was not the breakfast that dreams were made of. As the love of his life some decisions needed to be made.

Thus, I took matters into my own hands, strolling over to our camper and triumphantly pulling out some rolls. “Why don’t you have an egg and bacon roll instead?” I suggested with a knowing smile. Boet’s eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “Now we’re talking!” he declared, grabbing the frying pan with the enthusiasm of a man who’d been waiting for this moment his entire life.

With an exaggerated flourish, Boet waved a pack of bacon at Hubby, as if signalling the start of a culinary revolution. The sound of sizzling strips soon filled the air, punctuated by the steady clinking of a spatula against the pan. Within minutes, the aroma of bacon frying over a gas flame transformed the entire campsite into a breakfast haven. The smell alone felt like a victory lap.

Boet, always the self-appointed maestro of campfire cooking, couldn’t have been happier. With the pride of a true craftsman, he layered bacon and eggs onto the rolls, creating masterpieces that could silence even the most ardent yogurt fans. Hubby bit into his roll, savouring the moment like he’d just discovered the meaning of life. Boet looked on, his mission accomplished, grinning like a well-fed Cheshire cat.

Breakfast wasn’t just a meal that day for the boys—it was a declaration. A triumph of bacon over blandness, of joy over yogurt. And with Boet at the helm, there was no question who ruled the breakfast camping kitchen.

## Conclusion

Traveling and living with family—it’s a beautifully chaotic symphony, isn't it? Yes, it’s messy. Yes, it comes with its fair share of exasperated sighs and quiet eye rolls. Are there moments you daydream about solitude? Absolutely. But oh, the memories—the laughs, the shared sunsets, the inside jokes that no one else would understand. Those are the treasures that make the irritations feel like the price of admission to something extraordinary.

No, we’re not perfect, but that’s the magic of it all. Differences are what keep it interesting; they’re the seasoning to the stew. And while the road can be bumpy, I wouldn’t trade riding shotgun with this quirky, lovable crew for all the tea in China. And trust me, I take my tea very seriously.