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## NOMAD



Table Mountain

The breakfast table was covered with pancakes and Cape oranges, the sort of combo which would make no sense at home in Scotland, but makes the best possible sense when stretched over a linen-covered table in the shade of a South African verandah on a warm September's morning. Sue, an old friend and my host for a few days, was taking command of me as usual.

'We will go to the mall, buy some cappuccino and a copy of the *Cape Ads*. You will find a car, then I can pick up some groceries, and by the way we need to be home by 10.30 a.m.'

'Finding the right car will take time,' I said and began to tell Sue the reasons why I wouldn't be able to buy a suitable four-wheel drive by 10.30 that morning. Plenty of reasons: things to do with extra ground clearance, twin-cab models, torsion bars, mileage limits, model types.

Sue nodded, but clearly wasn't listening. Her expression told me all I needed to know – roughly, 'Yes, dear, but if we don't go to the mall right now and get that four-wheel drive of yours, we're going to be hard pushed to be back here at 10.30.'

I sighed, reckoning up the weeks that it would take to organise the safari. Van der Post took two months to outfit for his expedition to the central Kalahari, not that I intended telling Sue that. For now, I thought I might as well just fall into line. Sue hustled me away from the breakfast table (me feeling a bit the way Isla must have felt every morning for her last 15 years), got me into her car, a beat-up Toyota, and drove down to the shiny new urban mall that could be a symbol of the modern South Africa.

The mall was built in the traditional Cape Dutch style with white stucco gables shaped like jaunty Dutch hats and long cool verandahs. A line of cypresses ran down one side of the car park. Above them, clouds were riding high over Table Mountain. Sue swept me quickly past the flower sellers that flanked the main entrance and into a bustling café, filled with the wonderfully natural post-apartheid mix of black, white and every shade in between. Sue got us some coffees whilst I bought a copy of *Cape Ads*, the local free-ad newspaper, from a kiosk outside; then she installed us at a corner table and settled down to her own newspaper. I busied myself with the ads. Nothing looked at all promising. The one good 4×4 was way out of budget. The cheap ones were dire. As I reflected on the injustices of life, I remembered a time when an earlier passion had been thwarted. I was six. Every time I passed the toy shop my eyes were drawn to a beautiful wooden yacht, sails hoisted, rigging and fittings perfect down to the smallest detail. But the price was astronomical relative to my pocket money. The word hopeless hovered not far from reach.

I'm not usually a groaner, but I must have let out something, because Sue looked at me sharply and asked what the matter was.

'Oh, nothing,' I said, 'there doesn't seem to be much here, that's all.'

'Go and talk to the café owner,' she ordered, and buried her head back in the paper.

Again I was baffled, wondering what Sue could be thinking. After all, I did know something about buying secondhand four-wheel drives, having owned a variety of them at different times and driven one across Africa. You found them by combing the paper for weeks, or by contacting four-wheel drive clubs, or visiting specialist garages, or even by hanging out with overlanders at their favourite campsites. If you were lucky, someone at the end of an international contract would be selling up before leaving the country, and a friend of a friend would put you in touch. There were in fact lots of ways to find a reliable secondhand 4×4, but they all took time and none of them had anything to do with the local café owner. But then there was something about Sue, events seemed to fall into line around her, as if by magic. She had life pretty much sorted out, I decided. And it was really quite relaxing to be told what to do, so I pushed back my chair and went looking for the proprietor.

'He's over at the counter,' called Sue.

I found the café owner next to the till attending to some accounts and put my question to him.

‘I would try Richard Quixley,’ he said, half looking up.

I blinked a couple of times. ‘Would you happen to have a telephone number?’ I asked.

But Sue was already at my elbow. ‘It’s only a mile down the road,’ she assured me. ‘Come on, time to go.’

We drove down to the main street of Constantia, turned left, continued for another 200 metres, and there on the opposite side of the street was ‘Nomad’. She was an Isuzu 4×4 twin cab, standing prim and proper on the forecourt, unpretentious but business-like. I hurried across the street and walked right round her, trying to be circumspect but unable to hide my interest, a bit like one dog getting to know another. Richard came over from the desk, aware that I was hooked, but too polite to say so. We started swapping yarns about cars we had owned and loved. It transpired that Richard’s real passion in life was racing souped-up performance saloons, and by all accounts (at least by all of *his*) he frequently got the chequered flag. He told me that Nomad had belonged to one previous owner, a farmer, who used her once a week to drive into Cape Town. She was low mileage, reliable and cheap. We agreed the price at 55,000 Rand. Job done.

Sue was waving frantically from her car across the street; I ran back over and jumped in.

‘How did it go?’ she asked.

‘Sorted,’ I replied.

She laughed as we took off down the high street with a screech of rubber and headed for the supermarket. Half an hour later, we were back home with several bags of shopping. I glanced at the clock in the kitchen: it was 10.30 a.m. exactly. I turned to thank Sue for her fantastic help, but she was already on the telephone. To my mental list marked ‘Ways to buy a 4×4 in Africa’ I added one more: know Sue.

The rest of that day was spent doing car-related things with Geoff, Sue’s resourceful yet easygoing husband and one of my mates from uni. Back then we had spent more time rebuilding classic cars than studying. Once again it stood us in good stead. We sorted out the safari modifications, arranging for a dual battery system (so I could run a laptop and lights in camp without depleting the car’s battery), tyres that would be suitable for brutal off-road driving, ‘high lift’ jacking points for when I got stuck in deep mud, and much, much else.

Among the chores that day was heading over to the AA office in downtown Cape Town, to secure a *carnet de passage* that would enable me to drive across Africa, importing and exporting the car at each border. The very capable

manageress took on the job and was soon talking animatedly on the telephone as she nudged a bank guarantee down the line from North Berwick, my home town in Scotland, to London to Johannesburg to Cape Town. She was alternately friendly and efficient, outraged, drippingly formal, deeply concerned and sweetly seductive. I was slightly in awe of the way she seamlessly combined the roles of businesswoman, actress and sympathetic human being in conducting the everyday affairs of her office. At one point she almost lost her patience whilst debating some technicality with a bank clerk in Johannesburg. 'But my client is driving to *Africa!*' she expostulated. '*Africa!*'

I didn't say anything, but the oddity of the word made itself felt. Here was a local African, in Africa, talking to another African who himself was located in a not too distant African city. But towns are towns, and the coast is the coast. Africa, the real Africa, the one of my imagination and hers, lay well outside Cape Town's cosmopolitan limits.

The moment reminded me forcibly of another place and time.

It was the summer of 1970 and it seemed a long way off now, almost a different me. That younger me had been happy-go-lucky, more in the here and now, but lacking in purpose. I'd had no direction, no compass to steer by, other than a fascination with wild animals and far-off places. I'd ended up in Kenya on a 10-week trip, by accident almost. After travelling all over the country, gazing at wild African animals by day and camping under the stars at night, I'd fallen under the spell of the place, completely and for life. One Sunday towards the end of my visit, I was invited to lunch by a safari operator who had retired years earlier, but still undertook the occasional expedition. The invitation brought me to his home, which turned out to be a plot of land with a vehicle workshop, a solid-looking storehouse, and two spacious safari tents. There was no house. The old-timer looked after the catering himself, barbecuing steak and onions over an open fire and serving them up on freshly baked rolls with green salad. Inevitably, the conversation turned to wildlife and the far-flung corners of Africa. Sitting beside me, the old-timer started to talk of Kenya as it had been in the 1920s, with remote mountains, untouched forests and endless plains teeming with game. Much of it was now gone having been turned under the plough, overrun with livestock, or converted to forestry plantations, even where the land had supposedly been protected from development. The litany of woes continued for some time.

'People are plain greedy,' the old-timer concluded, 'and nothing is going to change that.'

'Not everyone,' I protested. 'Some people do care about wildlife. They can make a difference.'

I said it. I meant it. Back then, I really believed in the power of positive change.

The old guy gazed at me a moment in silence. I don't know what he was thinking, but then out they came, 10 words spoken slowly and deliberately, with all the finality of the closing lines in a Shakespearean tragedy: 'You mark my words: *they will all disappear one day. Every single wild place.*'

Then and there, in that bustling AA office, with the manageress now busy with some other bureaucratic problem to chase down, I realised why I had come. I needed to face up to that old-timer's challenge. The end of the wild. Was he right? Was he wrong? I was here to find out.