

PREFACE

Sometimes you just have to do it. No reasoning, no accounting, no planning, you simply jump... and pray the landing is soft.

That day began like any other: alarm chirps at 6.30, shower, exercise routine, wake Isla from her coma, yoghurt and toast for breakfast, into the car and off to school. It was hot though, unusual for coastal Scotland, and the air was muggy. A few hours later I was checking the pressure in the tyres of my Ford Mondeo at the local Esso station – the hiss of air, the smelly haze of petrol, the wilted daisies by the litter bin, trying to make a go of life – when I thought of Africa. I noticed the sheen on my shoes, polished for the meeting. When did I do that? This morning? Yesterday evening? Sometime in a routine series of mechanical preparations for another pitch for another contract to save wildlife. How many reports have I written? How many academic papers? Have they made the slightest difference? The hiss of air, the smell of petrol, the darkening sky, a heavy roll of thunder, and Africa bloomed in my memory.

A small but insistent voice whispered, ‘Now is the right time... You can do it... This may be your one chance.’ Do what? Go back to Africa without a project. Go back to Africa with no purpose other than to know, to feel, to understand. Go back to meet the man I once was and question his assumptions. Go back to face my old adversary. I could see that younger me on the forecourt, bush hat lifted at the front, safari shirt half unbuttoned, one eyebrow raised in a mocking challenge. That younger guy seemed to merge with the voice in my head, pushing me, almost taunting me, as if in some playground dare. ‘If you don’t go back now, you might as well turn away forever.’

For a moment I thought about my one-man wildlife consultancy business. It had taken 10 years to build up. Ten years of fighting for contracts, assisting

faltering projects in remote corners of the globe, holding evaluation teams together and writing interminable reports. The work was highly competitive and just keeping afloat consumed every spare moment. I couldn't afford the time away. Worse, this journey would put my future job prospects at risk. But one by one the objections were overturned, vanishing from sight like tent pegs plucked out the sand by a gathering storm. Eventually only one peg held firm and I might have guessed what she would say.

'You've got to go for it Dad. My friends think it's so cool. And I'll be happy boarding.' Isla seemed positively excited at the prospect, perhaps expecting that boarding for a term would be like some awesome sleepover party. I really hoped so. At 15 years old it would be her first taste of independence. Not a bad thing, but we were used to sorting things out together, more like a team than a dependency. And if one of us was down, the other jumped in to lend support. I told myself that she would be fine and that, after all, the journey was for her and her generation, but it didn't make it any easier. Once the last peg had pulled itself out, with a hop, skip and a jump, the tent gathered itself up and flew off with the winds, arriving in Africa a few weeks later.