

PROLOGUE

Live. Work. Die.

Nothing levels us more. Whether you're in the streets of London, the towers of Dubai, or the paddy fields of Asia, there's no escape.

But while living and dying are natural, work's a bitch. It keeps us on edge, sweating over exams, fretting over interviews, losing sleep over retirement. It drives us; it defines us; it keeps the world spinning. We're all part of it, this great game, striving to earn, advance, and prosper.

The Great Game.

It's a term used to describe how the UK and Russia vied for Central Asian supremacy in the mid-1800s, but it's far better suited to the working world. That's because we're all tied to the workplace, vying for supremacy, desperate to leave victorious. Yet for something so integral to our everyday lives, so central to who we are, it's a game with no rules, no instructions, leaving most of us to wonder how the hell it should be played.

And that brings us to the question, the one that torments and inspires, that demands clarity and self-awareness; it's a question so challenging it often goes unanswered to the end, surrounded by memories of a life misunderstood.

It's no less than... *the ultimate question*:

What should I be doing with my days on Earth?

It's a riddle we try to solve from an early age, but one that many grapple with into their thirties, forties, and beyond. It's a question that led me to pen this tale, for mine is a story that's seen me flirt with insanity in search of an answer, going to extreme lengths to

ensure I become one of society's success stories.

It's been tough, it's been an adventure, but above all it's given me an understanding of the working world, and why being able to answer that question right is so very important, because the way you spend your nine-to-five affects every aspect of your life, and ultimately, your happiness.

A WORLD OF OPTIONS

"I want to look into women's handbags."

It was the statement I innocently announced to my mother at the age of five after a trip to London's Science Museum.

Once we'd returned home, sitting round the kitchen table, I proudly told her what I wanted to be when I grew up: "A museum man." It was the first time I'd expressed any interest in a career, and she was delighted, assuming I wanted to curate one of world's great institutions, consumed by a life of academia.

Then she asked why.

"Cause, Mummy, I want to look into women's handbags..."

"But that's not..."

"...like the museum welcome man, who takes the hats and coats."

That life of academia vaporised.

Yet to her credit she didn't seem disappointed or perplexed, she just smiled sweetly, not showing any concern as to her son's voyeuristic ambition. Maybe she was just happy I had a goal. Any goal.

It wasn't to last.

Like most kids I regularly changed my, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" answer. Fireman, policeman, astronaut, *The A-Team's* Hannibal Smith, they all made the list. An adult's working life seemed like a pic 'n' mix theme park; a magical place of fire hoses, flashing lights, rocket ships, and the ability to turn Tupperware into explosives. It was something to love and enjoy, so why settle on just one line of work?

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Enjoy them all, seemed the obvious theory.

So I did.

After two decades in the working world my inauspicious list of jobs now includes: pizza delivery boy for one night (I quit, debt being easier and more in vogue), safari guide, second assistant director, junk removal man, locations assistant, barman, ski rep, marketing exec, charity phone salesman (sorry to everyone I called), caterer, tour operations manager... and that's just the half of it.

It's not surprising I still ponder the ultimate question, wondering if I'm on the right path. And if I am, could I have got to where I am faster? How did I take so many wrong turns? Are some people just 'late-starters'? Should there have been better guidance to help me find my path sooner? Why wasn't it easier?

Answering all that depends on how much you know about yourself from an early age, whether you know what you want out of life – at any age – and how much help you get, or ask for. I was born into a supportive family and went to a decent school, but it didn't lead me to run a major corporation, or start a trans-Atlantic airline; with a similar background, nor did it for Sir Richard Branson. His work ethic did. That's because, wherever you're from, it's down to your drive and your goals.

It's a dog-eat-dog world; navigating it isn't easy, but the hardest part for most people is step one, the ultimate question.

And I was clueless.

But everyone needs an answer, whatever it may be, so I set about finding mine. Not knowing where to start, I began with a simple goal, focusing on something I loved, something I thought should define my life from the day I left school:

Travel.

Of course everyone says they love travel, much like everyone loves watching movies, eating chips, and breathing air. A generic love of travel is an obvious offshoot of cheap fares, but I wanted travel to be integral to my working life, not just my time off. I knew

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it was possible, as I'd been told so for years, having repeatedly heard a phrase that first appeared in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 'The world's mine oyster.' Growing up I heard it over and over again, and started to believe it.

I mean truly believe it.

I mean take it as gospel.

I wanted to experience the planet in its entirety, working from the mountains to the deserts, from the cities to the wilds. My thinking was, *we live on a massive ball of rock floating in a big bundle of nothing, and it's there for me to explore*, so that became the plan. I assumed that following it would make for a happy life, but it left me facing yet another question: What career would match the plan?

Unsure, I fixated purely on my desire to travel, believing the answer would materialise... somewhere, in a foreign land.

How naïve.

My story is of a regular man undertaking a universal task, that of finding his path in life. Things didn't go *quite* according to plan, but I still believe in 'the oyster theory' – of being able to go anywhere and do anything – even though I now know it's a theory that requires finesse.

Yet as a teenager I thought it a theory beyond limits, and wanting to deploy my travel plan straight off, the first corner of the globe I chose to experience was a long, long way from home, deep inside a country ruled by a geriatric despot.

It was time to put the theory to the test.

It was time to start my search for the ultimate answer.

It was time to put on the shortest shorts a man should ever wear.

CHAPTER ONE

London, 1996.

Fuelled by a teenage obsession with Land Rovers, coupled with an ability to sing the entire score of Disney's *The Lion King*, on leaving school the scene was set. There was no fighting it. I had to follow my destiny. I had to become a safari guide in Africa... and so began my first ever job hunt.

Fully supportive of the decision to dispatch her son to the far side of the world, my mother put me in touch with a friend at the South African tourism board, and in turn she suggested I contact Tusker Game Reserve. It was a private ranch, not in South Africa, but in northern Zimbabwe; its owner, she'd heard, was on the prowl for staff. I took down the number, fingers crossed.

After a few days exchanging calls and faxes with the reserve's owner I was amazed to be offered a trainee guiding position, starting as soon as my paperwork could be processed. The owner – a dour man with Scottish heritage – told me that all I had to do was arrange a work permit at the Zimbabwe High Commission; once done I could pack, fly south, and so fulfil my safari guide goal.

The world really is my oyster, I thought. The only hurdle was the work permit, but I expected it to be a simple procedure, probably a half-hour of form-filling and fee payment, resulting in an exotic new passport stamp.

If only.

At eighteen years of age, one wide-eyed Englishman trooped off to the heart of central London, and so entered the world of bureaucratic hell that is the Zimbabwe High Commission. In later years I'd learn that most nations possess such places of torturous rubber-stamping idiocy, the pen pushers that populate them creating wastelands of red tape in order to infuriate all who dare enter.

Rain-streaked, leaden, and imposing from the outside, the High Commission's interior welcomed without awe, stale furniture reeking of better times, long past. I stepped up to the reception desk, interrupting a bespectacled lady and her coffee break crossword, asking as pleasantly as possible what form I'd need to request a work permit. It would be the first of many times.

Soon enough I'd be reminded of the film *The Twelve Tasks of Asterix* where our intrepid Gallic hero has to find Permit A38 in 'The Place That Sends You Mad', an official Roman building full of uncooperative staff, confusing corridors, and lethal stairs. After I'd been sent to half a dozen disparate offices, ordered to fill out nonsensical paperwork, told to wait at each stop, only to be dispatched to yet another distant department, I too found myself going steadily insane.

As the staff began to filter home for the day, I collapsed back to the reception desk, exhausted. The bespectacled lady glared at me, pondering my work permit query, then she sat back, shaking her head. I prepared to be sent to yet another corner of that labyrinthine building.

"You can't get it here," she said. "It has to be done by your future employer in Zimbabwe."

Surely this was a cruel joke, obscure revenge for Britain's colonial past? Whatever it was, it didn't fit the oyster theory. The receptionist smiled, deliberately: *Yes, we've been fucking with you.* I meekly turned tail, soaking up my first lesson in international employment rules, yet I was determined I wouldn't let a building of vindictive civil servants alter my chosen path.

Calling the ranch owner only confused the situation. He assured me my work permit had to be dealt with in the UK, stating there was absolutely no way it could be processed at his end. I said I'd take care of it, mulled over a return to the High Commission, discarded the idea within seconds (fearing fast-tracked insanity), and decided instead to rely on a tourist visa.

I'm only going for six months; the tourist visa covers six months, so why

bother with the paperwork? It was an instinctive decision, based on weighing up the odds, coupled with above-average laziness, and a schoolboy mentality of manipulating the system.

Case in point: the school cross-country marathon. Its figure of eight design meant the lazier children – read myself and esteemed associates – dodged the first loop of the race, only running the second loop. Other boys had tried telling the Head of Sports they were ‘legally entitled’ to withdraw from marathon running, but I could see it wouldn’t wash. It wasn’t worth the hassle. Far better to pretend you’ve run the full race. It was an attitude that led to a line of spectators aghast at my arrival, because having missed half the marathon I was able to jog to the finish line behind the fittest and fastest in the school.

Yet it’s one thing manipulating an institution designed to keep children under control, a whole different story when you’re breaking the rules of a foreign government. But that was my strategy, one that boasted as much foresight as an American war in the Middle East.

I wasn’t oblivious to the pitfalls of working on a tourist visa, but assumed that as long as I made it through passport control I’d have the system beat.

It turned out that Zimbabwe had far bigger fish to fry.

One illegal safari guide was the least of their worries.

“What’s the purpose of your visit?” was the acceptable question thrown my way, after a nineteen-hour journey connecting in Paris and Johannesburg.

“Tourism.”

Stamp!

“Have a nice stay,” beamed the uniformed officer.

“I’ll try,” I beamed back, as unseen my heart rate hit 180, cold beads of sweat bullying their way to my brow.

I raced to the baggage hall, grabbed my backpack, and fled the scene, entering Zimbabwe on a sizzling September’s day. As the stress

of the journey abated, my pulse calming, I scoured the dusty airport exterior. Safari jeeps and minibus taxis carpeted the scene. Arriving tourists stripped off layers, acclimatising. Hotel staff unloaded departing bags; unused dollars exchanged hands. African beats thumped from waiting cars. I scanned the lot, searching for my ride.

It didn't take long.

The boss had said to look for Martin, who'd be wearing a Tusker Game Reserve shirt. No further detail was needed. Martin was unmistakable. A South African in his thirties, there he was, standing proud in groin-hugging shorts, khaki shirt, and wide-brimmed Akubra sun hat. We made contact, him showing me to the company's clapped-out minibus, elephant logo on its side. I smiled. I couldn't believe it. *This is really happening.*

Once on board, he cranked the engine; it sputtered into life, and we departed Harare Airport, entering the city's purple-blooming, jacaranda-lined streets. It was a short urban swing, as within twenty minutes we were clear, pushing into the breadbasket of Africa, Zimbabwe's once profitable and productive farmlands.

After England's manicured gardens and surreal gnome collections, it was liberating to bump along mile after mile of open road, surrounded by beige land and sprinkler-fed crops, dodging tractors, and giant antelope road-kill. The insanity of the High Commission was instantly forgotten as Africa seduced me.

I revelled in the change. It was the opposite of everything I knew. Out here there was no safety net, no mother's voice, no government advice. I was on my own, thousands of miles from home. Nobody knew me, and I knew nobody. It was exhilarating, challenging; it was adult.

With that in mind, I began to consider the job at hand, my first proper job. I'd worked before, but nothing more than odd days for family friends, painting sheds and picking fruit. Those are jobs that if done poorly carry nothing more than the threat of a parental reprimand; most people are thrilled if their job's completed, let alone finished with finesse.

This was different. Cocking up the safari job would mean an early return home, tail tucked firmly between legs. Failure was not an option, which left me stressing as to what I'd be doing for a little known employer in a little known corner of the world. What I'd been told about the job was limited: the medium-sized property of forty thousand acres needed someone to guide tourists around the reserve – that much I knew – but quite why they'd let a teenage Englishman join the team was a mystery. I mulled over the work required, coming to the same conclusion I'd reached before: it can't be that hard.

Do training. Meet tourists. Show animals.

I presumed part of the reason they'd employed me was that I'd accepted the eye-wateringly low salary of £50 a month, enough to buy the local Newbury brand of cigarettes, an ice cream or two, and a few trinkets in the village market. Yet beyond tobacco, sugary treats, and mass-produced gifts my expenses were limited. Everything was provided for: a room in the staff bungalow, food, drink, and a fast education in Africa's wildlife.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

And then, worry vanished, adrenaline rose, as we'd arrived. On either side of the road soared thick stone pillars, iron letters arching between them, their wondrous message silhouetted against the sky:

Tusker Game Reserve Welcomes You.

We bounced into the reserve, leaving behind the towering green and yellow maize of the neighbouring farms. Martin told me that due to its populated, agricultural location, the ranch's carnivores – lion, leopard, hyena, and cheetah – had to be kept in enclosures for safety, leaving the grazing plains strewn with some of the most confident antelope in Africa. We swept past them, Martin clocking the species. The unmistakable black and white zebra was all I recognised. The rest sounded like items off a mythological menu: kudu, sable, impala, hartebeest, waterbuck, wildebeest, buffalo, roaming before me, no longer confined to a textbook.

After a ten-minute drive we pulled up to the staff bungalow, a beige concrete block, four rooms long, two wide, rusting chairs out front, whereupon Martin dispensed the most critical lesson of all: “Check your room every night for bugs and beasts.” There weren’t many places to hide, my bedroom containing a single bed, wooden chair, and prefab wardrobe, so I wasn’t particularly concerned; but less than an hour later Martin was proved right, as I spotted a small, demonic-looking scorpion scampering into a shoe I’d just unpacked.

Big scorpions can hurt, the guidebook told me, but it’s the small ones that pack the biggest punch. I eyed the shoe.

Should I crush it?

No, I’m here for the animals. No, no, no.

I gingerly picked up the trainer, as carefully as a parent waking a teething toddler. Hands shaking, I opened the window, flipped over the shoe, and dumped the lethal stinger into the bushes below, at which point it disappeared into the darkness, its hidden location haunting me for weeks to come.

In need of a drink, I raced to the guest lodge to meet Martin. The traditional wood and thatch building had a high roof over a simple dining area, its walls adorned with antlers and animal hide. Outside was a large wooden deck, wicker chairs lining its edge, giving way to a gentle, grassy slope that ended in a moat, beyond which the antelope gathered around a muddy watering hole.

Sipping a beer that first night, hearing the white noise of cicadas, the low rumble of lion and thunder, overlooking grazing animals feeding under floodlight, confirmed I’d made the right move. It was classic, clichéd Africa, as promised by a thousand brochures, and a Disney cartoon.

The following day, a different scene, roused not by a fairy-tale chorus of African birdsong, but by Martin revving the engine of his tan 1974 Series III Land Rover, shouting at me to join him. It was 6am. Cool, but not cold. Crisp, but not brittle. I jumped out of bed, peered inside my trainers – all clear – and was outside within five minutes.

School was in session.

From that moment on I'd follow Martin everywhere, learning the lie of the land (the hills, plains, lakes, and caves), mastering the route of the game drive, being shown how to take care of visitors, and being tested to identify the reserve's most common animals, birds, and plants. It was 'Safari Guiding for Dummies', rather than a Masters in Zoology, but I didn't need to know everything, just the basics, so I absorbed what I could, and after three weeks of shadowing, taking notes, and revising the route, was deemed ready to take a tour.

To mark the auspicious day I was given my uniform: a khaki shirt and a pair of shorts so tight an American cheerleader would think twice before donning them. But it was an honour; I was part of the team. And so, adjusting tackle every five minutes, I rolled out on my first ever solo tour, cruising deep into the reserve, entrusted with a group of chattering tourists. As I'd witnessed on Martin's safaris, they fired off predictable queries, and in turn I spewed out the same stats that guides have been repeating for decades.

The top tourist questions are always about cheetah speed, hippo aggression, giraffe height, lion appetite, and elephant poo. Once you master the 'Top Five' there's little to fear. The golden rule was to radio to Martin if I didn't know something. Never guess, not unless it's about varieties of poo. Big poo = big animal. Just prod it with a stick, or sniff at it knowingly. Tourists love that Bear Grylls touch.

After a few outings I knew when and where questions would pop up, the game drive following the same route every day, beginning in the plains for an hour, after which we'd canoe a reservoir for forty-five minutes, eat a sadza (maize-based) lunch, visit the big cat pens, ending back at the lodge for farewell drinks.

It was simple, physical, rewarding employment, beginning at sunrise, ending at sundown. Anyone who hasn't worked outdoors should experience it, at least once, if possible in southern Africa surrounded by the world's finest natural beauty. I challenge anyone

not to fall for that rugged terrain.

Every day it impressed me more, and as it did, the job became easier, my confidence growing, reaping fatter tips. But as I became comfortable with the nine-to-five, the ‘honeymoon period’ slipped away, allowing the realities of the working world to surface, soon to tear the grin off another fresh-faced grunt.

Number one reality: The Boss.

With every job there’s a chief, and that person makes or breaks your working life. As a safari guide I had a direct manager, a cheerful, blonde, thirty-something lady who made life easy, even fun; but her immediate boss was the tall, seventy-something, white-bearded farmer of Scottish descent, Mr Douglas.

Old man Douglas lived on extensive farmland near the reserve, but not on the reserve, so he was detached from our day-to-day operations. His main business was the highly profitable tobacco plant, grown on most of the farms in the area, as I was to see when Martin took me up a *kopje* (hill) to point out the local properties.

Tusker Game Reserve extended far into the distance, but beyond it you could make out green swathes of farmland where Martin told me they grew tobacco, along with peas for Marks & Spencer, lettuce for Tesco, sweetcorn for Sainsbury’s, and so on. It seemed the region’s farmers were growing most of Britain’s food, and half the world’s tobacco, but of course it wasn’t *them* doing the labour – they owned the land – it was the native population whose hard graft was putting baby carrots on dinner plates across the Home Counties.

Seeing the scale of the industry, and knowing ours was merely one of many agricultural areas, my ‘honeymoon period’ blinkers slipped off, and I began to see Zimbabwe for what it really was: a post-colonial conundrum that relied on its rural black population to toil away, existing as second-class citizens.

The issue of land ownership sustained that status quo, the divide exacerbated by the comfort in which the white farmers lived

compared to their black employees. The imbalance was so significant that it seemed, to an outsider, as if the country were still under white rule. That's because land means power, particularly in an agrarian economy, and seeing as the whites owned the lion's share of the most fertile farmland, yet accounted for less than one per cent of the population, the power imbalance was clear-cut.

For a young Londoner it was puzzling; here was a country that in 1996 still had significant white control, even though its native president, Robert Mugabe, had held power since 1980 (initially as prime minister), having taken over from Ian Smith's illegitimate white-rule government, which itself had declared independence from the British in 1965; and the Brits, of course, had started it all when Cecil Rhodes colonised tribal lands in the late-1800s creating Southern Rhodesia. Considering the country's turbulent, divisive history it amazed me that Mugabe hadn't immediately implemented land reform on becoming PM. What had he been doing with his sixteen years in power? Perfecting his golf swing? Learning Spanish?

Something was amiss, and it remained unclear until I learnt of the small print in the Lancaster House Agreement (LHA), a UK-negotiated treaty that oversaw the 1980 transition to Mugabe's regime. Besides its peace-not-war objectives, there was a contentious clause ruling out land reform for ten years, unless white owners *wanted* to sell their property. If they did, they could do so under a 'willing buyer, willing seller' policy that guaranteed market prices, funded by a 'land resettlement grant' backed by the UK and international donors.

Peace, cheap labour, and the option to sell at a market rate?

Unsurprisingly, Zimbabwe barely changed.

Most farmers liked things the way they were. They opted to stay put. Even after the LHA's ten-year clause expired there was little push for land reform, Mugabe's government maintaining a policy of 'fair compensation'. Despite the introduction of the Land Acquisition Act in 1992, pressure to sell prime farms remained low,

leaving the state of affairs to kick on into the mid-90s.

And so, as neighbouring South Africa abolished apartheid, electing Nelson Mandela to office in 1994, Zimbabwe was stuck in the past; yet change lurked over the horizon, firstly due to the 'land resettlement grant' expiring in 1996, and secondly due to a polished politician sweeping to victory in London, celebrated to the sound of D:Ream's 'Things can only get better'.

Not so for Zimbabwe's white farmers.

Following the election of Tony Blair's government in 1997, New Labour changed tack on post-colonial relations, distancing itself from Britain's past. Clare Short, the new Secretary of State for International Development, said her administration was, "without links to former colonial interests..." and therefore had no "...special responsibility to meet the cost of land purchases."

Mugabe, one assumes, was livid. He believed white farmers to be a distinctly British problem. New Labour, it appeared, did not.

Of course in 1996 it was way too early to foresee the 'fast track' land grab that would see white farmers, often violently, forced off their properties from July 2000; but even so, hints were in the air.

And I was to get a personal taste of those hints, on bumping into two groundsmen as they tended to a broken fence at the edge of the safari reserve. On spotting me they stopped their work, apparently keen to chat; I stopped too, not realising I'd soon be trapped in a particularly awkward conversation.

Discussing salaries is not the done thing

This is what I should have said to the blue-overall-clad pair, but it might have dented our nascent friendship, so when they told me they knew what I earned I didn't say what I was thinking, I merely asked them what they'd heard. The answer was spot on: £50 or 600 Zimbabwe dollars a month. (This was years before hyperinflation pushed the currency into the absurd, the government famously issuing a 100 trillion dollar bill in 2008.) Telling them they were right, I leant against a tree, trying to be nonchalant, but in reality I was livid, embarrassed at my pittance of a wage.

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Before I could ask how they knew, they asked me why I needed to be on such a high salary. *Excuse me? High?*

They continued, on a roll:

“We’re earning half that amount, and have families to support, so why should you earn so much? Is it because you’re European? Is this fair? Why should a white man earn more when we’ve been with the Douglas family all our lives, and we know more about the ranch and its animals?”

I was speechless, unsure what to say.

“It, it, it, it, it, it’s because I, I, I, I come from the same place that many of the, er, er, tourists come from... and they can, I, I, I guess, easily talk to me.”

Nonplussed faces stared back, but it was all I had. Fortunately they could see I was as surprised as them, or they didn’t want the moment to become any more awkward, as one of them swung the conversation from my tycoon earnings to inviting me to their ‘compound’ to see how they lived.

I smelled a rat, and made my paranoid suspicions clear by declining the offer in the most English of ways possible:

“What a lovely invitation. I look forward to it immensely.”

The following day the two workers tracked me down to tell me that a visit that very night would be good timing. I knew why. It was that popular day that has people jumping for joy the world over:

Payday.

In northern Zimbabwe that would mean villages and compounds celebrating with Chibuku, the local beer, a sort of alcoholic mud that needs drinking before it turns to poison. Not being a huge fan of the toxic potion, that evening I bought six bottles of lager, then took off down the dirt track that wound for a kilometre from the lodge to the compound, to where the native labourers were housed, tucked far out of sight, away from the guests and their bubbling plunge pools.

It didn’t take long to reach, but having never been there before

I stopped at a distance, taking it in: there were around a dozen breeze block huts, a shared water pump, a communal fire, some wooden benches, and a handful of animated chickens. No power line. No phone line. It was a glimpse of how the other half lived; but not wanting to ruin the evening – something I’m more than adept at achieving – I decided not to comment, instead focusing on the night ahead.

Once in the compound, I was surrounded by children playing games, women cooking dinner, as their husbands milled about in overalls and gumboots, sharing stories of the day. They teased and laughed. They ate and drank. It could have been any post-work catch up, anywhere on Earth.

As the last rays of ruby sunlight streaked the sky, the community disappeared indoors, leaving me to sip beer, and poke the fire. Some twenty minutes later, as darkness took hold, they re-emerged. My jaw dropped. I was treated to an unexpected sight, something I’d only previously seen in *National Geographic* magazines and GCSE textbooks, something from a time before the arrival of the European: before me was a fully kitted out African tribe, covered in animal hide from head to toe, feathers bristling on high, brandishing shields and spears. It was a colourful, powerful throwback to a way of life they clearly didn’t want to forget.

Then the penny dropped.

In an instant I could see why they’d hark back to ‘the good old days’. No more punching-in for an unappreciative boss, forced to watch the other half enjoy the fruits of their labour. No more donning blue overalls earning pennies to work land that once belonged to their ancestors. And of course they’d hate the fact that I – a tenuous link to the coloniser – earned more than they did, especially at the age of eighteen, *especially* given my limited safari knowledge.

I’d be livid.

Maybe it was the giant joint being passed around, but in that warm, hazy campfire moment I reached a state of champagne socialist enlightenment, and then, like every other champagne

socialist, I decided it was far too serious for polite conversation, so buried the ‘good old days’ topic forever.

After several more tokes, and a few slugs of Chibuku, my head was spinning, as I danced around the community fire, singing songs, mimicking ancient war dances. Sadly I looked like a drunk uncle ‘bopping’ at a family wedding, but bridges were being built, friendships being formed... and that’s where it goes blank... the following morning I was sore headed, fuzzy-mouthed, but ecstatic about my trippy night dancing to the African beat.

Until I was summoned for my first ever ‘strike one’ chat.

And it hit me for six.

“Where were you last night?” demanded Mr Douglas.

He’d collared me as I was walking through the grounds, bleary eyed, nauseous, en route to meet a group of guests for their introductory safari chat. Unaware there was a problem, I told him I’d been at the compound celebrating payday with my fellow employees. I thought he’d see it as company bonding, and maybe even be impressed at my efforts to learn about the land, its traditions, and people, but nothing could have been further from his mind.

“Go down there again and you’re out,” he barked, before marching off.

I stood there, frozen. If I’d been a cartoon character I’d have been suspended in mid-air, head extended from my torso, limbs taut at every angle.

Number two reality: Beware the Boss.

Without knowing it, I’d broken one of his cardinal rules: you don’t socialise with the native population. He never said it in those words, but the implication was clear: *mix at your peril*. From a working point of view I’d been given my first official warning. From a personal point of view I’d seen behind the curtain, into the backward mentality of a land modernity forgot. The reprimand was also a lesson in how a job’s ‘dos and don’ts’ can spill into your private life; it was simple, but sad – in order to keep my job, I’d need to toe the line.

Following the compound incident I became one-tracked, focused on guiding. I threw myself into the job, becoming mentally and physically stronger. And after just seven weeks I began to notice something unusual. Something unprecedented. I was looking 'toned'. I didn't even know I had the requisite muscles to be toned; I knew they were likely enough there, but they'd always failed to overcome their apparent shyness, hiding behind a stubborn layer of donuts and fish fingers.

With the physical change came a new confidence. I felt manly, even when wearing short shorts, knee-high socks, and moccasin shoes. I looked like a member of the Village People who'd collided with a rugby-playing Eskimo. Yet I wore the uniform with pride, rolling up my sleeves to a level last seen on American sailors in '50s musicals. Smokes tucked in. Dancing with a mop.

Yes, I was *that* manly.

And I loved it; the 'Africa bug' had bitten... hard.

That's not a terrifying parasite that swims up your urethra, killing you from the inside (which, by the way, does exist in parts of the continent), but a term anyone who knows Africa will recognise; it's the inevitable love visitors develop for that rugged, spacious land, and its vibrant wildlife.

I'd been bitten, no doubt, but there were several times when that love wobbled, and one time in particular when it was shaken to the bone, due to a request for me to feed an unusual lump of meat to the reserve's voracious leopard.

The strangest day of my life in Africa was when a racecourse in Harare dropped off a dead horse for feed, and the job of throwing the deceased animal's head into the leopard enclosure was given to me. By the time you're into your sixth attempt to lob a forty-kilo horse's head over a sixteen-foot fence you think differently about a nice day at the races. You're also adept at ignoring the pool of vomit you've coughed up, the horse's eye swinging from its decomposing head, and the 200-pound leopard agitating behind its chain-link fence.

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Once done, I returned to my room, took a long shower, and shelved the experience. It was part of the job, and as long as I could do the job I'd flown there to do, while avoiding Mr Douglas, the working world suited me just fine. I'd do whatever they asked of me, and I'd do it with a smile.

But just as I was feeling settled at Tusker Game Reserve, developing a mature approach to the workplace, becoming knowledgeable in the animals and terrain, unbeknown to me a fax would soon arrive with the power to change everything.

And as my eighth week in the job came to a close, that fax was being penned in a first floor flat in distant, darkest London.

Back in 1996, in the farming communities of Zimbabwe, communications were more akin to the 1930s than the latter end of the 20th century. Local farms shared one telephone connection called a 'party line', which meant that rather than pick up the phone and dial someone, you'd pick up the phone and there'd be a neighbour speaking, whose conversation you'd have to interrupt.

"Alright Bob," you'd say, "Can I make a call?"

"No problem, just give me five minutes," would be the usual answer.

I had no mobile phone – they were rare in those days – and even if I'd had one, connections were terrible; there certainly wasn't 3G, 4G, or broadband. The 'party line' was the only way to connect to the outside world, but we weren't allowed to make phone calls, so contact with home was done via a fax machine, which, for those of you born after 1990, effectively sends copies of paperwork down the phone line. You feed a sheet in one end, it's digitised, and seconds later printed out by a similar machine thousands of miles away.

Faxes had to be routed through Mr Douglas's office, usually sent by his staff in the middle of the night when the 'party line' was less busy. Every few days I'd write a page or two to friends or family, telling them how I'd been hit by an elephant or bitten by a hyena,

and they'd send something back. Standard stuff. Messages for my eyes would be dropped off at the staff bungalow, waiting for me to read at the end of my shift. There was a charm to it, like taking photos on film, travelling an ocean by boat, or wearing a suit for the sake of wearing a suit.

What I didn't realise was that the fax machine was right beside Mr Douglas's desk, and – far more importantly – that he read every outgoing and incoming message, top to bottom...

"Get back to the lodge right now!!" barked the ageing boss.

On a bright, fresh morning I heard those words and feared the worst. You don't need to be an expert in the working world to know that a shouted order doesn't lead to an unexpected bonus.

At the time I was forking out hay from the back of a pickup truck. It was 7am; already warm. The peak of dry season; dew long since burnt off. Dung beetles went about their business. Zebra waited to feed. Dust hung in the air. But my peaceful morning was interrupted by Mr Douglas careening to a halt alongside me, just long enough for him to deliver his unambiguous order.

I threw my gear into the pickup and followed him to the lodge, driving through air turned dense by his aggressive acceleration. He stopped outside the staff bungalow, and climbed out, arms folded, foot tapping.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded of me, thrusting a piece of rolled up fax paper into my hands.

I took it, unrolled it, and began to read. As the large man paced in circles I saw that it was a fax from a friend in London writing to say, 'Hi, hope you're well. Hope you're meeting loads of great people. Sounds like you're loving Africa. It must be a fun experience. Great that you're now a trained guide. And how amazing it is that you've slept with the boss's wife six times, and he still doesn't know...'

I stopped.

I'm no genius, but I was fairly certain where the problem lay.

"What the hell is this, Charles?" he said again, which of course

sounded more like, “Wat de hell is dis, Chars?” in his utilitarian Zimbabwe accent.

There are times in life when you know that whatever you say just won’t cut it. Instinctively I knew I’d never again lead a safari drive at Tusker Game Reserve, or sip sundowners overlooking the lodge’s watering hole, or even lob another horse’s head to their ravenous leopard. Nonetheless, I tried saving the moment. My first job couldn’t end due to a fax suggesting I’d had sex with a woman fifty-five years my senior, who was, no offence to Mrs Douglas, not exactly my type.

“Er...” I stammered, “it, it, it’s got nothing to do with me. It’s a joke. Not a good one, but it’s just a joke.”

“I judge a man by his friends, Charles, and your friends are fucking idiots. You had something to do with this, and even if you didn’t, I would still judge you by your friends.”

Seems fair, I thought.

“Go pack your bags. You have one hour, then my driver will pick you up, bring you to see me for your final salary, then take you to Harare,” he added, so ending my African dream in two simple sentences.

With that he jumped back into his car and sped off, taking the troublesome fax with him. Part of me wanted to cry, part of me wanted to laugh, yet my angst was focused on my idiotic friend who’d penned a fax that would compel the other guides to believe I had a thing for the much, *much* older lady.

True to his word, one hour later a driver showed up. *This is actually happening*. I was in shock. On seeing the car, disbelief that I could be dismissed in such a way sunk in, but when you’re working illegally there’s little you can do. I grabbed my bag, and was soon being driven from the reserve, past the eland, kudu, waterbuck, and wildebeest, past the impalas and zebra, past the farm workers, past the leopard and lion. I took it all in, one last time.

Soon enough we were on the drive to the boss’s house, somewhere I’d rarely visited, but was damn sure I’d now remember.

A twenty-foot chain-link fence topped with barbed wire surrounded his immaculate lawn, swimming pool, and three-storey colonial house. We parked. I approached the gate. An elderly guard manned the entry point. On the other side was a fearsome Rhodesian ridgeback.

I eyed the dog, aware the staff avoided it. The guard pushed open the gate. I walked in. The dog looked up. The guard closed the gate behind me. The dog started in my direction. I paused. Fearing the worst I turned to the guard, who smiled, and then said the most poignant line I'd ever heard:

"He won't attack. You're white."

In five words he'd summed up Zimbabwe's deep-rooted divide, yet before I could dwell on the moment my former employer was beckoning me into his house to collect my severance pay. I meekly followed, patting the mini-horse as it slobbered over my legs. And then, as I climbed on to the wooden porch, lo and behold, the subject of my supposed lust wandered outside; it was none other than the irresistible septuagenarian, Mrs Douglas.

"Hello, Mrs Douglas, do you know why I'm here?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she replied.

"So can you tell your husband it's not true? It's rubbish. This is..."

I stopped, knowing my next words would underscore my teenage years.

"...so unfair."

"Yes, but what Mr Douglas says goes, so that's all there is to it."

I knew there was no point in trying further.

The pair of them deserve each other and they can go to hell, my mind ranted, *they've ruined my life!* And then, like the teenager I was, I held out my hand to accept a wad of cash from an authoritarian figure, head down, eyes to the floor. I left their house without giving any further line of defence, climbed into the waiting car, and with a heavy heart asked to be driven to Harare.

As the arched sign over the game reserve diminished in our

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wake, disappearing into the folds of a mirage, it seemed an unlikely way to be spending my mid-morning, but life can be like that. A three-year relationship can end in a throwaway comment. A technological advance can wipe out a decades-old industry. A single decision can lead to disaster, or heroics.

A person's qualities, they say, are judged not by how you behave on an average day, but by how you pick yourself up after a fall; how you cope with a bad situation and make the most of it.

I needed to make the most of a bad situation.

But first, it was time to take stock.

JOB ONE: SAFARI GUIDE

Lessons learnt:

- Government bureaucracy can be incredible in its futility. If needs be, assess the system, and work out how to beat it
- Discussing salaries is not the done thing
- A job's 'dos and don'ts' can spill over into your private life
- Your boss will probably be a pain, whatever you do, wherever you go
- Everyone should work an outdoors job, at least once
- It's harsh to judge a man by his friends... but maybe fair
- Never shag the boss's wife, even if it's not true. And I promise it's not. Yet even though I've asserted my innocence over the years, people still think I have a thing for the much, *much* older lady

CHAPTER TWO

Harare: unemployed, 5140 miles from home.

Decisive action was needed, but my first step was the same one all boys – and many men – take in times of trouble: I called the mother.

“I want his name!”

She was livid, demanding to know who’d sent the fax, on the warpath for whoever had screwed up her little boy’s African adventure. Not wanting blood on my hands I gave her a fake name, so saving the world from a brutal incident of maternal revenge, and then, once the mood had calmed a touch, I told her I hoped to stay in Zimbabwe, that I’d given myself a week to find a new job, and that if I failed, she’d need to expect me back in London far sooner than initially planned.

My return flight wasn’t due to depart for three months so needed bringing forward, as I prepped for the likelihood of an early exit. In those simple, analogue times, otherwise known as ‘The Pre-Internet Age’, that meant communicating with Air France’s regional office... *in person*. I tracked it down in Harare’s drab, medium-rise central business district, an area strewn with street hawkers flogging a factory load of textiles, elephant carvings, and giraffe statuettes.

A grey block housed the airline’s operation, and once inside I found a musky travel centre, time-warped, sun-bleached posters printed eons earlier promoting Paris, Lyon, and the French Riviera. ’70s beige and brown held fort, strip lights belching a uniform neutrality. Cutting through the dust-laden air, I approached the counter, unfolded my papers, and asked the blue-and-white scarfed agent if my ticket could be changed to depart seven days later, with the option of a further change, if needed.

The woman behind the counter listened to my request and responded with a distinctly French shrug, even though she was native Zimbabwean. I wondered if it was requisite for the job. As she tapped away with apparent disinterest, I mused on the idea of Air France making her suffer through months of Parisian training.

“Next week we do the boff, the zut alors, the shrug, and if you succeed you will learn ze ‘wrong directions for Englishman’ routine. Study, femme, study!”

Clearly having scored full marks, she tapped, twiddled, shuffled, and shrugged, eventually sliding over a set of updated tickets, before turning back to polish her long, purple nails.

It was now or never.

I had seven days to find a new job, with dwindling cash, and no work permit. At least my first safari job had left me with a decent grounding in taking tours, the confidence to talk to guests, and a clear understanding of Zimbabwean rural life... surely that was enough to open a door or two?

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

I grimaced, gripping my ‘safari company hit list’ tighter than a drowning man clutching flotsam. It was all I had as I pounded the uneven streets, a man on a mission. There were about twenty businesses to visit, and – determined to try them all – I marched into every one, invited or not. Unfortunately safari operators in Zimbabwe are less numerous than hotels in London, or brothels in Amsterdam, so I was soon running short, as I continued hearing the same answers:

“We’re not hiring.”

“It’s not the right time.”

“You have no work papers.”

“We heard you shagged the boss’s wife.”

With two days left until my return flight, out of options, I slumped back to my hostel hoping to fall into a state of happy

delirium with the help of a dozen beers and some idle banter. On entering the backpackers' retreat I was surprised to see two of my ex-colleagues sitting on bar stools, decked out in their short shorts and khaki shirt uniforms. I waved, smiling, but was on edge, unsure what they wanted.

"Bru, we've got good news," said Martin, grinning broadly.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" I asked.

"Mr Douglas has received another fax from your mate in England," said Lee, a tall, fair Zimbabwean in his late-twenties.

"Great, what now?"

"It's an apology."

I'd told my fax-writing friend in London about the carnage his first missive had caused, ranting about how he'd ruined my time in Zimbabwe, but I hadn't expected him to send an apology.

"Really?"

"Mr Douglas wants to offer you your job back. Everything as it was. He apologises for going off the handle and would like for you to return," said Martin, playing the part of the good news messenger, expecting me to leap from my seat in fervent joy.

Except I didn't.

What I said next surprised even myself.

"You can tell Mr Douglas..." I started, "...well, you can tell Mr Douglas... you can tell him to take his job and stick it up his fucking arse," was my eloquent response.

The guides thought I was joking.

"Yeah, sure. So you want to get your things?"

"I'm serious," I replied. "He thinks I want to work for him now I've seen how he treats people? Now I've seen what he's like? No way."

Martin gawped at me as though I'd spat on his grandmother's grave.

"It's a no. Thanks, but no thanks," I added, reiterating my stance in a slightly more polite, professional way.

Saying "no" was an instinctive reaction to a messy situation.

Even though I knew I could have cancelled my flight and headed back with them that very afternoon, it would never have been the same. The dynamics had changed between Mr Douglas and myself, and I knew the job could never be as it once was. Maybe I'm too proud, maybe I was still angry about being fired, but I stand by the decision.

That ship had sailed.

The two guides, perplexed by my response, headed back to the park, jaws dragging. Before leaving they wished me well on my return to the UK, justifiably believing my time in Zimbabwe to be finished, having seen me all but seal my fate.

But fate was about to turn my way.

For an oyster came a-knocking.

"Pack your bags!"

"Eh?"

"Get up, man. Pack your bags!"

"Eh?"

It was six in the morning, as the first rays of an African dawn broke through the odour of my male-only dormitory, one day before I was due to fly home. By that stage in my brief job hunt, with nothing on the table, I'd prepped myself for the embarrassment of an early return, had vaguely planned to punch my fax-sending friend, after which I hoped to blend back into London life, memories of my African adventure fading to nostalgic pulp.

The person kicking me out of bed had other ideas.

"Come on, lazy, I've gotta get going."

Her name was Kat Mason. I'd met her three days previously when she'd told me her lodge, Shute Safari Ranch, had no work available. But things had changed. The good news was that a job had come open; the bad news was that she'd decided to tell me by pulling me out of a beautiful, beer-induced sleep at six in the morning.

"What the..." I stuttered, bleary-eyed, half-naked.

“I need a guide. Are you interested?”

“Er... yes,” was my confused, instinctive response.

“Pack your bags. We’re heading to the lodge.”

Needing no more incentive I jumped out of bed, brushed teeth, packed bag, and was ready to leave in ten minutes, something most of my friends would say is beyond my skill set. Turns out, all it takes is the fear of failure.

Once on the road the reality of the situation dawned on me, like a hippie stumbling into a marijuana plantation – slowly at first, followed by the world’s biggest grin. The oyster theory was alive and well in southern Africa. I was to work at one of the biggest private ranches in the country. It was a miracle, a reprieve for my battered pride, and a last-minute escape from clichéd quips like, “you’ll get back on the horse,” said with a slight squeeze of the shoulder, a patronising glint in the eye; but instead of facing such blatant *Schadenfreude*, I was sitting in a Toyota pickup truck beside a perfect stranger, en route to guide safaris on her famed ranch located about 100km north-west of Zimbabwe’s capital. Set within some of Africa’s most lush and bountiful lands, it was blessed with every species of animal, insect, flora, and fauna that tourists love to see.

To my amazement my desperate search for work, along with Kat’s employment needs, had collided to save me. It was a lesson in how luck and timing can determine your career path, often being just as crucial as education and talent. Sometimes you plot a course and set sail; other times you go where the wind blows, and the wind that day was blowing me towards stunning waters.

We rolled into the ranch an hour later, the world’s biggest grin still slapped across my mug. The property spread out in all directions, was four times the size of Tusker Game Reserve, boasted five more Land Rovers, and could accommodate twice the number of tourists. I dumped my bags, called the French Zimbabwean to change my flight – I could swear I heard her shrug down the line – and then I lay on my bed, amused by the chaotic nature of life.

The uniform would again be shockingly short shorts, so again I'd feel like a member of the Village People, but I wasn't complaining. I'd been given a second chance to wear them with pride. And so with short shorts on it was time to learn the lay of the land, where to find the buffalo, rhino, hippo, and elephant, and how to mix the lodge's speciality sundowner cocktail.

In my varied, choppy and – some might say – disastrous career, those days at Shute Safari Ranch stand out as some of the happiest and most satisfying, and therefore there's not much to comment on.

I could reminisce about a British Airways cabin crew arriving, skinny dipping and leaving, without me seeing a glimpse of their glorious pool time; or I could wax lyrical about an enraged rhino trapping me in a damaged vehicle for two hours, finally being freed by passing workers scaring off the confused bully. Those are memorable tales from a positive experience, an experience I relished having been saved from an early return home, so my main take-away was simple:

Appreciate it when times are good.

My employer treated me well, and in return I worked hard, and did a good job. It's the way it should be, and I can only hope they saw it the same way. I look back on my time there with a sepia-tinted fondness that filmmakers use to identify the 1930s, and that's more than enough.

In fact, it's ideal.

Enjoying it, the days merged into one; I lost track of time.

Christmas arrived, barely noticed; it was just another day, another safari, but as I dragged myself from bed I felt a change in the air. It was the second time in as many days that I'd felt it, the first being as I drove through the outer reaches of the ranch, not a soul in sight, and glimpsed an African image I'd dreamed of seeing: two giraffes strolling across an open veld (grassland) towards a thorny acacia tree, sun setting behind them, the entire scene tinged in a golden-red richness.

I'm unsure why I wanted to see this vision of Africa, but it was in me, as clear as a marketing poster for a national park, or a still from *The Lion King*. Déjà vu. I scrambled for my camera, unable to believe what I was seeing, couldn't find it, looked again, then stopped, sinking into my seat. I took a deep breath, realising the moment was just for me. Forget the camera, forget sharing; this was mine and mine alone. I can still recall that image, as clear as any photograph, and it's mine to enjoy, my perfect African vista.

But from that moment on, something changed.

It wasn't all that noticeable at first, just an unidentifiable itch, a gnawing thought, yet before long it had resolved into an unavoidable desire, as clear as parental advice on narcotics. It was a simple realisation, but it was the truth:

I'd got the T-shirt. I'd done it.

It was fait accompli.

Whatever I'd come to Africa to achieve had been achieved; it was time to move on. I'd taken a hundred safaris, and that was enough for a boy who'd arrived to experience Africa, not become a permanent resident of Africa. Having learned every facet of animal weight, feeding habits, mating practices, nocturnal behaviour, and more, having seen my 'giraffes at sunset' vista, having swatted a million mosquitos, I knew I'd been a safari guide long enough.

I told the Mason family I was ready to head home, and we agreed on a late-January departure date. Itchy feet had forced my travel plans. Little did I realise it would be the first in a long line of 'itchy feet' decisions, catapulting my career in unpredictable directions throughout my twenties and thirties.

But, I reasoned, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

After all, the oyster theory permits it.

JOB TWO: SAFARI GUIDE, TAKE II

Lessons learnt:

- Knock on every door and be tenacious. It's not until you've tried every option that you can resort to self-pitying drinks at a hostel bar

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- Stand by your guns; be wary of knee-jerk employers
- The fear of failure is a powerful force
- Sometimes you set sail, plotting a course, but other times the wind blows, and you go with it. Pray it leads to stunning waters
- Never wander off when randy cabin crew are in the vicinity
- Recognise when the going is good, and enjoy it
- Even the best jobs can become monotonous
- There's no stopping determinedly itchy feet