

My Footsteps
IN AFRICA

A life journey

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A life journey
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To women who follow their hearts:
“It’s better to have loved and lost,
than never to have loved.”

Prologue

We were on the runway – engines roaring at full throttle. The plane took off. My stomach lurched and turned head-over-heels. I closed my eyes tightly and gripped the arm-rests with steely fingers.

“Dear Lord,” I prayed through clenched teeth, “please, help the pilot to do the right thing. Don’t let him take off too soon or too steep. Don’t let him even-out too quickly. And please, don’t let there be any terrorists on the plane!” I held on grimly – willing God to respond

The giant engines strained with exertion as the plane climbed higher into the vast nothingness. The gong sounded and I heard the clip-clop of seat-belts being released. I blew out an amazingly long breath. We made it – God, the pilot and me!

“Bravo!” I shouted with a triumphant glint in my eyes and beckoned to the stewardess, “Please, fetch me two double whiskeys, ice and water and serve one to the pilot.

Tell him I'm celebrating his accomplished departure, but will hold off on the terrorist thing." She gave me an incredulous smile and disappeared into the galley. Now, I could relax and enjoy the exterior scenery of white, marshmallow clouds, riding on a turquoise-blue horizon.

I pinched myself, just to make sure I wasn't dreaming, and giggled loudly. It was true. I was here – in this seat – on this aircraft, and I was on my way to Africa. After nearly eight years in the States, I was finally going back to see my family – a sister, two brothers, nieces, cousins, and one or two uncles and aunts that were still among the living.

The whiskey did a fine job; I closed my eyes dreamily ... South Africa – the land I had left behind. It held so many precious memories, and so many broken dreams. I wanted to go back in time – retrace my footsteps, cleanse my spirit of a lingering nostalgia and old regrets that haunted me. I wanted to be free – a new person, when I stepped down from that plane in my beloved South Africa.

I ordered another whiskey and winked mischievously at the stewardess. It was going to be a long flight, and I had a strenuous road of remembrance to travel. One last time, I was going to the archives of my life and take the rose petals and the thorny barbs off the dusty shelf, hold them with infinite care in my hands, and let the bittersweet memories come alive again. Then I will be done. If a few tears stain the ashes of reminiscence, I will not wipe them away, but gently, lay them in the deepest recess of my heart. I will cover them with a fragrant bouquet of hope, happiness,

faith and a peaceful heart.

The years will pass and seasons will journey, but time cannot erase the love, the joy, and the distant echoes of dysphoria that lived in our hearts so long ago on that farm in Africa.

Growing-up

I slid out of my mother's womb on a balmy September day in 1944, and opened my eyes on the outskirts of a small, rural town at the southern tip of Africa, called Zwartuggens (meaning: black backs or ridges).

Early ancestors from France and Holland, sailed the stormy seas and landed on solid ground at the Cape of Good Hope in the 1700's, in their quest for religious freedom and a better quality of life. While they could practice their faith freely, life was not always easier. In time, the settlers became disillusioned and fed-up with the inveterate English Government and the stringent tax laws. My forebears packed their belongings on an ox-wagon and trekked into the unknown interior. They had to content with hostile black tribes, wild animals, and deadly, nameless diseases. Many settlers lost their lives in skirmishes with warring black tribes.

My grandfather, on my father's side, was a soldier in

World War 1, and was fortunate to have come home with all his faculties intact. On his return to Africa, he became a construction worker. Years later he was employed as a “shunter” on the railway and, eventually, died of stomach cancer in 1948. My grandmother was blessed (?) with thirteen children (of whom three died young). Six boys and four girls survived; a wild bunch – to say the least.

My grandpa on my mother’s side, was a “squatter” on a landowner’s farm for most of his life; though, in later years, he transported firewood by ox-wagon to the gold mines on the Reef. He died of prostate problems in his sixties in the year 1936. Grandma gave birth to sixteen children (of whom two expired in infancy at an English concentration camp during the Anglo-Boer War).

I was about four years old when my family moved fifteen miles out of town to a farm with the name Waterval (Waterfall). It comprised approximately two hundred and forty hectare of bushveldt, encircled by a horseshoe formation of mountains. The immediate surrounding landscape consisted mostly of savanna, dotted with typical thorn-trees and sparse shrubbery.

My earliest memories take me back to the rectangular tobacco-house in which we lived temporarily. Hessian bags bulging with corn kernels, were stacked high in single rows to form four primitive walls which protected us from the open veldt. In the meantime, my father constructed a three-roomed house of mortar and homemade bricks. The latter, he manufactured from red clay and fired them in

searing heat. The three rooms had a flat, slightly-sloping sink roof. When it rained hard, the noise on the corrugated sink sheets scared me out of my wits. When it hailed, the din was an experience out of hell, that had me crawl under my narrow bed, fearing the end of the world was upon us.

In time, my father added-on a lounge and a veranda. The floors were made of concrete with a layer of smooth cement topping. I watched, in awe, as he sprinkled the red, yellow, and green powder-stains onto the wet cement surface, and then passed the trowel over it to create a colorful artwork of elongated splotches and curves.

In summer, we “fried” under that hot, tin roof and were, inevitably, driven outdoors under the merciful foliage of the nearby trees. So, my father built a rondavel (a big round room) with a thatched rooftop and three small windows for a cooling effect. The floor was accorded the same treatment as the house’s. The result was a pleasantly cool, dim interior where we could survive the hot-as-hell summer heat.

The outside lavatory was a distance from the dwelling. It was basically, a hole in the ground with a wooden seat built over it – high enough to sit on, with another hole in the crudely fashioned seat for your buttocks to peep through. When your bottom was immature, it was a precarious activity – and I had to hold on mightily, while my vulnerable behind dangled dangerously low through the wide opening.