

## Singer of Songs

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Gordon was back from Africa after another year in the bush and we met in a pub, as usual. I always met my friends in a pub. They understood. Janet had kicked up a fuss, also as usual. "Don't you dare come home drunk, or you'll sleep in the garden shed..." A lot more like that, stuff I'd been hearing for the last thirty years. [...]

5 Gordon was just the same, tanned and lean, maybe a little more grey. He stuck his hand out and I shook it, embarrassed.

"Oh, sorry," he said. "I keep forgetting. Been overseas too long." In Scotland, you shake hands with someone once, and that's enough for life. You don't have to do it again.

"That's all right," I said. "What'll you have?"

10 He gazed at the bar signs. "They've changed all the names. What on earth is McEwen's Eighty Shilling Ale?"

"The old Export. New name. Still tastes the same though. Fancy a pint of that?"

He nodded, and I pushed through to the bar to watch the glasses being filled. [...]

15 Gordon raised his glass in salute. "Slainthe<sup>1</sup>." He took a long slow swallow and groaned with pleasure. "Man, man. That's just pure nectar." His accent always seemed to change with the first pint. The English softened and the Highland<sup>2</sup> grew more pronounced until, at the end of the evening, it was as if he had never left Ardnamurchan<sup>3</sup>.

That first pint brought him up to date with the old crowd, what was left of them, when we'd all been students together and closer than brothers and the whole world had beckoned<sup>4</sup>.

20 Sam had died. Heart attack. Bill Crowder was killed in a particularly stupid car crash. Jim MacDonald had made enough on the market to retire to Corfu. Of all of us bright young men from all over Britain, Gordon was the only one who had really lived the dream, who had travelled to exotic places and led an adventurous life. We'd all meant to, had talked about it constantly over innumerable pints of McEwen's in many bars, but somehow we had been side-tracked by marriage, family, life. Gordon and I had kept in touch mostly through Christmas cards and a visit every year or so when he came to Scotland on leave.

The second pint was football, start to finish. [...]

Occasionally someone would drop by, be introduced, and exchange a few words. They had all heard about Gordon from me.

30 On the third pint, it got personal.

"How are the kids?" he asked. "And Janet?"

"Aileen had her second in the spring, a girl this time. George says that's enough, and he's going to get himself gelded<sup>5</sup>. Isabel is still in Glasgow, working hard, being a career woman."

"And Janet?" he prompted.

35 "Janet is just the same as ever."

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<sup>1</sup> Skål

<sup>2</sup> (her) dialekt fra det skotske højlånd

<sup>3</sup> halvø i den vestligste del af det skotske højlånd

<sup>4</sup> (her) lokket os

<sup>5</sup> steriliseret

Gordon grunted, noncommittal. "When was the last time you had some of your friends over to the house?" He meant my own friends, the old crowd, not Janet's bridge<sup>6</sup> and music society lot.

"About two years after we got married." I glared at him. "I don't want to talk about it. My life's not worth talking about. Tell me about Africa."

40 So he told me stories of the stately elephants who strolled past him unconcerned, and the occasional lone bull<sup>7</sup> who wanted to show the human who was boss, and of meeting snakes in the bush and walking carefully round the ones that were too lazy to move, the puff adders and Gaboon vipers<sup>8</sup>. And how one day he lifted a beer crate in his cook tent to find a black mamba curled underneath, frightened and ready to kill. "What did you do?"

45 "I dropped the crate on it, quick." He grinned. "Who says too much beer can't hurt you?" He signalled Kirsty for refills, and she brought them, smiling. She never served customers at the tables. Gordon's magic obviously still worked.

50 Some of the stories I had heard before, but there were always enough new ones to hold me spellbound. I filed them away in my memory, to use in the pubs for the next year until he came back with more.

"We came across a country bus that had hit a landmine. Left over from the war, one of the ones they didn't find and clear." His eyes got dark as he remembered. "Two people killed outright, and six injured, two badly." He swallowed hard, gripping his glass until his knuckles whitened. "Luckily some of my crew had worked in the deep gold mines in South Africa and were very good with first aid. They saved them."

"Aren't you worried about hitting a mine yourself?"

He shook his head. "Not really. It doesn't take much to mineproof a Landrover." He grinned. [...]

60 "I really envy you, though, Gord. Damn, but you live an exciting life. Nothing ever happens in Edinburgh." I sighed. "I can spend whole evenings in the pub telling people about my mate Gordon who hunts for diamonds in the bush and deserts of Africa. I tell them your stories about snakes and elephants, and strangers think at first that it's really me who has been there and done all that."

I drained my beer, grabbed both glasses, and moved towards the bar for a refill.

When I got back to the table, he was leaning against the cushions, his eyes blank.

I slid the glass in front of him. "How's Susan?"

65 He looked uncomfortable. "She left me. About a year ago now. Couldn't take the excitement any more." His voice was suddenly bitter.

70 He hunched forward. "You want to know how exciting my job really is?" He stared into my eyes. [...] "I've never told you this before. Ashamed, I suppose. I go out in the morning, as soon as it's light. I line up two stakes a few hundred metres apart, on a compass bearing<sup>9</sup>, and start walking from one to the other. Every five paces, I dig a pound or so of soil out of the ground, put it in a little plastic bag, mark the bag with a code, and drop it on the ground for my crew to collect. Then I walk five more paces, and do the same again. And again. And again."

75 He sipped his beer, and his voice took on a harsh tone. "And when I reach the other stake, I move it twenty metres sideways, my crew moves the first one twenty metres sideways, and I do the same thing all over again. All bloody morning, with a break for breakfast. Then I stop for lunch and a siesta

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<sup>6</sup> kortspil

<sup>7</sup> hanelefant

<sup>8</sup> *puff adders and Gaboon vipers*: giftslanger

<sup>9</sup> pejling

while it's too hot to work, and then I do the same thing again in the afternoon. All bloody afternoon. Until it's dark."

His hands were clenched into fists. "That's the exciting world of a diamond exploration geologist. That's what you're really missing."

80 I was appalled. This was a side of him that I'd never seen, never heard. "But... I thought you sometimes really did find diamonds. How...?"

"Oh, yes. We find diamonds. But not me, personally. That's the job of the follow-up crews, who go after the areas the laboratory says look good." He drank some more. "And you think your job is monotonous. Thank Christ for the snakes and the landmines and the occasional rogue<sup>10</sup> elephant. 85 Otherwise, I'd have shot myself years ago from sheer bloody boredom."

I was silent for a time – we both were. It was a revelation to me, that he thought his job was tedious even with the hot tropical sun and the smell of the red dust of Africa [...].

Boring? My job was the boring one, working on electronics all day, making up songs and playing my guitar in the house while Janet was out with her social peers, or drinking in the pubs with my 90 mates whenever she was at home. Sometimes I'd combine the two and play and sing to a borrowed guitar on open mic nights in one of the folk pubs. I shivered suddenly. If Janet ever found out about that... The shame of it, she'd say.

"Mac," he said at last. "There's something else I've never mentioned to you. You'll maybe think it's daft." He hesitated, then gathered his courage visibly about him and plunged on. "In Africa, in my 95 field camps, my crew know all your songs. Remember that one you made up about the Hornbill<sup>11</sup> and the crazy way it flies, and the way it sits at the side of the road when you drive past?" He recited softly. "Crouched in the dust with the world spinning by, fearful of living and frightened to die."

This was hitting far too close to home<sup>12</sup>. I'd been writing as much about myself as about the Hornbill. But I nodded, and he continued. "I taped some of your songs, remember, a few years ago, 100 and my field assistant translated them into Shangaan<sup>13</sup>. It's close enough to Zulu and Fanakalo<sup>14</sup>, so everybody can understand. Costa is a great singer; most Shangaans are. You're a hit in the African bush, old son. They call you Hlabela lo Ngoma – the Singer of Songs."

He banged his glass down suddenly. "Why don't you come out for a visit, man. I'll take some leave and we'll tour the country for a month or so, visit Vic Falls<sup>15</sup> and the Ruins<sup>16</sup> and the Wankie 105 Game Reserve<sup>17</sup>, maybe even drive over to the Okavango<sup>18</sup> in Botswana if we've time, see elephant and lion and possibly some leopard if we're lucky. [...] What do you say?"

I laughed, more in surprise than anything else. Me, a disillusioned electronics techie<sup>19</sup> and occasional folk-singer in the Edinburgh pubs, singing and playing my guitar by a mopani<sup>20</sup> wood campfire in the African bush while the leopards hunted nearby. It was quite irresistible.

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<sup>10</sup> uregerlige

<sup>11</sup> næsehornsflugl

<sup>12</sup> *This was hitting far too close to home*: (her) Jeg følte mig virkelig ramt

<sup>13</sup> afrikansk sprog

<sup>14</sup> *Zulu and Fanakalo*: afrikanske sprog

<sup>15</sup> *Vic Falls*: Victoria Falls, vandfald på grænsen mellem Zambia og Zimbabwe

<sup>16</sup> *the Ruins*: ruiner af en ældgammel by i Zimbabwe

<sup>17</sup> *Wankie Game Reserve*: nationalpark i Zimbabwe

<sup>18</sup> floddelta

<sup>19</sup> nørd

<sup>20</sup> træsort

110 He laughed too, and Kirsty appeared with more beer in response to a signal I hadn't seen, and we drank and talked as we hadn't talked in years.

When the pub closed we were turfed out into the rain and sweeping wind, and wandered up High Street, still making plans for me to escape, even temporarily, from the suffocation of a dreary job and a bleak marriage and the awful Scottish weather.

115 We found a taxi and Gordon got out at his sister's house. She'd left a small red-shaded light on for him in the hallway. I stayed with the taxi to the end of my road with its matching set of bungalows and I walked the last couple of hundred yards. I was drunk, but had enough sense left not to let the taxi drive right up to the door.

The hinges creaked a little, despite regular oiling. In the dark I unfolded the summer lounge<sup>21</sup> and hauled the sleeping bag from its hiding place. A hurried and furtive<sup>22</sup> pee against the forsythia bush outside, in constant fear that a nosey neighbour might see and report my filthy habits to Janet, then I dragged off my wet coat and shoes. The garden shed was cold and draughty, but the sleeping bag was a good one, a Woods Arctic, and I warmed up quickly.

125 What was that name? Gordon had pronounced it shlabela. Hlabela lo Ngoma – Singer of Songs. I had a little money squirreled<sup>23</sup> away that Janet didn't know about. There would be hell to pay, of course. Possibly even a divorce at the end of it all. Did it matter? Might even be an improvement.

The rain pattered on the roof and the wind gusted against the walls.

130 I fell asleep to the crackling of a campfire in the black African night with the diamond-hard stars overhead, and the chirrup of crickets<sup>24</sup> and in the distance the scream of an angry elephant and the coughing grunt of a leopard patrolling his territory. Voices sang softly in harmony, in tune with the wind.

And even in my drunken stupor, even in the dream, I wondered if I'd ever get there, if I would ever have the courage.

(2009)

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<sup>21</sup> drømmeseng

<sup>22</sup> (her) hemmelig

<sup>23</sup> gemt

<sup>24</sup> chirrup of crickets: fårekylningernes sang