

A story incorporating these words: Sailor – Waterhole – Treasure

Cut Price

Oom Dawie de Lange was always proud of his nephew, although he had a very skewed idea of what Kristiaan did for a living. Anybody who chose a life on the high seas was a sailor, as far as Oom Dawie was concerned. It was about as remote a concept as space travel, unlike managing two thousand acres of arid, desolate Africa, anyway.

Kristiaan's mother, Gertruida, bless her soul, was long in her grave, and her union with the late Hermanus had been otherwise childless. It was natural that Dawie's only living relative should be more than just another name in the flyleaf of the family Bible. His visits, when his luxury liner docked in Cape Town, had found a jaded Kristiaan coming out to the farm to unwind, detox and have a change from pandering to the fabulously rich and famous in his job as a cabin steward. It was quiet out there, hardly a farm, as Oupa Theuns was to discover after his return from the Great War, disabled, but quietly content.

Kristiaan was always courteous and appreciative to Katrina, the aged housekeeper, when she brought him drinks or food. His stays were a welcome interlude, his accounts of life in other places, climes and circumstances riveting, if sketchy on details and truth, were interesting.

Suffice it to say that Oom Dawie's last thoughts in this world were of Kristiaan; his last wish was that the farm should pass on to him, the Will containing as it did, a mysterious clause that "*the bequest should include any other assets or family treasures not mentioned in the above inventory*". It included substantial herds of wild game and not much else. Game, that by its nature, thrived as it had over millennia, and attracted paying visitors from the big cities, drawn, with their cameras, by a small advert in local newspapers and magazines. The few head of livestock had learned to survive in the same way, but provided little in the way of income.

Oom Dawie's passing and bequest were relayed to Kristiaan by telegram about three weeks after the event and via the office of the ship's Purser, delayed another day or so by the task of actually locating Kristiaan on the vast, floating palace. His task of purveying fine food and liquid comfort to bored and ageing women below decks was punctuated by dalliances to satisfy other less public needs for which his good looks and youthful energies equipped him.

However, an acrid, jealous conflict between two such voyagers was sufficient for the Master at Arms to pin him down and the sad news to be

conveyed. Along with a summary termination of his services, to take effect at the next port, which was Cape Town.

The company did not approve of disregard of decorum and morality, said the brief and tersely worded document in Kristiaan's jacket pocket. The termination package was just enough for two night's stay somewhere and the bus fare to the stop nearest to the farm.

It was a long walk to the house, as Kristiaan was reminded, but a still grieving Katrina welcomed him with such warmth that he wondered whether this was always meant to be his home.

Late afternoon sunshine in a collapsing canvas deck-chair on the sandstone stoep, sampling Oom Dawie's almost unbroached store of home-distilled liquor, stirred a semblance of resolve in Kristiaan and he determined, albeit unsteadily, to make his uncle proud.

"Katrina, more gaan jy my die hele plek wys," he said, as he made his unsteady way to bed.

"Ja, Baas Kris. Ons sal dit doen," murmured the old house-servant, clearing away the debris of her springbok curry, made to Oubaas Dawie's taste.

The next day may have started slowly, but by mid-morning, Kristiaan had worked out how to start the old Bedford truck, and together, they drove to the first and only stop. It was remarkable, only in that it occupied the middle of a relatively flat plain of blonde veld-grass with a few slabs of granite ejected from underground by the same primeval forces that ensured a year-round stream of clear, underground water. Kristiaan was unimpressed. But Katrina was unfazed.

"See here, Baas Kristiaan? See the spoor around it? All the animals come from miles around to drink here. Every late afternoon and early morning. The city people pay big to photograph them. Special if you build a thing on the little island to keep the sun off the visitors and we feed them good!"

Kristiaan had another look. The world of cramped accommodation and regular meals had not been without educational effect. He sat there a long time, visually measuring. There was still a tidy little sum left in Oom Dawie's account...perhaps?

The ruffian crew that Katrina summoned from the nearest township may have been motley, their wheezing truck little better, but they knew their various trades, and within a week, a wooden causeway led from the closest bank to the island and within another week, an open-sided hut of sorts offered shelter and unimpeded game viewing. Game that had melted away at the unaccustomed invasion returned as though all was normal.

A final touch was the erection of a sturdy pole to support a spotlight, powered by the home generator. Conveniently, a hole for the base had been left by an aardvark, long deceased.

It was fortunate that Kristiaan was there when the burrow was enlarged to accommodate the pole. Two feet down, a shovel struck something metallic. It turned out to be a dented toolbox, unusually rusty in this arid climate. The township artisans swooped on it with such enthusiasm as to cause Kristiaan to bark instructions.

Sullenly, two of them, aided by two others, wrestled it to ground level. It was heavy enough to require fetching the Bedford for the box to be manhandled into the load-bed.

Driving away, an elated Kristiaan saw the image of the gathering of disgruntled workers in his rear-view mirror, and reflected again, how fortuitous it was that he'd been at the site at that time.

Partially hidden from view in the Bedford's makeshift shelter, it took a few sharp blows with a cold chisel and a hammer to force the lock on the toolbox and the lid creaked open. Mouldering cloth covered the contents but it didn't conceal hessian sacks through which a faint glint issued a seductive invitation. It was a long time before Kristiaan could bring himself to extend a shaking hand to explore further.

Gold Kruger Rands, at the time, were valued at over three thousand rand apiece, and there were many, many of them. That night, Kristiaan did more than sample his uncle's distillations. Collapsing into bed, he had the presence of mind to take Oom Dawie's ancient shotgun with him, the reflection of those mutinous faces still in his mind's eye.

Next day, he set off for town, which was how everyone referred to Muishondlaagte. Unremarkable, in most respects, other than that it had prepared Oom Dawie's will, it boasted a branch of Oom Dawie's bank, and Kristiaan presented himself at the manager's office. Shortly, they were both out at the Bedford and Kristiaan unlocked the tailgate of the Bedford.

The manager's eyes took on a certain glaze when the lid of the toolbox was coaxed open and Kristiaan gestured at the contents. It was some time before he could speak and it was almost a whisper. "So much. So many...where...?" until he caught himself, and gradually, the colour returned to his face. He looked about him as though two men at a battered truck in the only street was a sign of something worth investigating.

"Aah, Meneer, the bank isn't equipped to deal with this sort of transaction. However, I know someone in Enkeldoorn who will be delighted, and errr ... shall

we say 'be equipped' to assist you. Should I give him a call? In the meantime, I suggest you park your... ah, vehicle ...round the back?

And so followed a period of bewildering experiences for Kristiaan. The man in Enkeldoorn conducted his business from a farmhouse very unlike the de Lange place. Mainly because of the high security fence and free-running Rottweilers and the unfamiliar intercom system at the entrance gate. The voice that answered Kristiaan's buzzer was heavily accented and suspicious, although the CCTV camera must have identified him and his vehicle from the bank manager's call and description.

With the dogs confined, the large vehicle gate opened remotely and nervously, Kristiaan drove in and round to the back of the house. He was not comfortable to note the bulge under the occupant's shirt when he emerged. There was no handshake or greeting. Much later, after a count, Kristiaan rejected the idea of asking for a receipt and simply nodded at the figure "Two 'undred unt ten, at 2 tousand rand each" reflecting that trust was a relative thing.

Driving back, the day seemed better. For one thing, he was alive. And well off.

Mike Job