

Equipment Failure

(A story using these three words: Spitzkoppe; Flax Seeds; Dermatologist)

From the start, I didn't like him much. Actually, from the moment when I picked him up from Swakopmund airfield and had to bring the Kombi right up to the shaded stoep of the departure lounge – because he wasn't going to walk the 50 yards to the end of the car-park where I'd left it. All the safari and desert experience drivers had got there before me and nobody cared that the desert lion kill of a gemsbok in the middle of the road from Spitz Koppe had delayed me.

Myself, I was still high on that fluid explosion of tawny power and ferocity from behind the dune on my right. It felled the last gemsbok in the small herd leisurely leaving the track at my insistent hooting. The attack was brief and blood curdling, the gemsbok poleaxed by the weight and efficiency of the attack, scimitar horns useless at the suddenness of it - and within seconds it was done, leaving me feeling vaguely like an accomplice.

Immaculate in the khaki ensemble his Munchen outfitters had prescribed, our guest looked like something out of a movie. I knew he was a dermatologist from the booking form on the front desk at the Lodge. Something that became all the more apparent from his scrutiny of my own skin from the second row of seats – a deliberate separation that further defined our respective roles. He leaned forward, surveyed me and sank back, murmuring to himself in German.

"What?" I asked, in a tone sharper than usual when addressing guests of the Spitz Koppe Lodge, but he didn't answer. See, I'd had a bad time of it, adolescence and all, so I was sensitive to visible examinations of my complexion. Shaving was the worst part of all and I'd avoided or delayed it as much as possible, until Ruth arrived. Thereafter, it was a daily ordeal I would have gladly inflicted on myself three times over. Well, twice anyway.

"Dr Bernsman," he'd said, over a perfunctory hand-shake at Arrivals, "but you can call me Klaus," disengaging his limp hand abruptly as though I might be harbouring something contagious. He gestured at his luggage, two matching tan leather cases on the trolley, and waited for me to lead the way with it.

"You are from Spitz Koppe?" he asked ignoring the logo on my shirt- pocket, possibly hoping there was a mistake, "where there is climbing?"

"That's the place, Doctor. *"Always a step up."* "You're going to love it." I answered dutifully. And went back to loading his stuff. With the airfield on the outskirts of Swakopmund, we were soon back in the desert, heading inland. In the rear-view mirror, my lone passenger was engrossed in *Der Spiegel* and all but invisible, so I left him to it, the road stretching away to infinity before me and requiring very little attention.

I started thinking about Ruth again, although she was seldom far from my mind. The day I'd first seen her, I'd known. Standing outside the airfield building, shading her eyes, with her case beside her, I thought there'd been a mistake. Someone taking the housekeeping job vacated by Mrs Ritter wasn't going to look like that. Probably some rich tourist who'd got the pick-up time wrong. But when I swung into the nearest bay, she saw the logo on the door, stopped frowning and that lovely face brightened in obvious relief. It was a smile that will remain forever in my mind's eye. In one smooth flurry of movement, she unlatched the sliding door and swung her stuff into the back seat and then joined me in the front.

"I'm Ruth," she said in a husky voice that I was to come to love, and took my hesitant hand in a cool, smooth squeeze, along with my heart.

If Ruth's hands were smooth, they proved to be exceptionally capable when she settled into her work at the Lodge. We never had more than two or three guests at a time, and although the menu was varied, it was set, mostly featuring venison or guinea-fowl prepared in a variety of ways. Ways that had taxed poor old Mrs Ritter's limited skills, until she'd given notice and I'd ferried her back to her sad little cottage in Swakopmund, while we waited for her replacement. The single, neatly typed response to Herr Hoffman's advert in the Swakopmund *Beeld* didn't leave much choice. For which I came to thank heaven. That it came from Malmesbury in the Cape seemed even more of a miracle and I also thanked the Namibian aunt who'd passed it on to Ruth.

In the first week, she'd scratched out a little vegetable garden in the back yard, close enough to the pump to enable her to water it, although I took over that duty. Gladly. It would reduce the long trips to Swakopmund for vegetables. I never thought of it gaining favour with Ruth. Much.

With the departure of Mrs Ritter, Herr Hoffman had wisely taken no bookings for a fortnight, so the arrival of Dr Bernsman was a pretty daunting re-start to business. By then, Ruth had made the Lodge a very different place, rearranging furniture, bringing in sun-bleached wood in decorative arrangements, even attractive pebbles in bowls in which tiny succulents came to terms with transition from their normal harsh environment. Herr Hoffman said very little about it, retiring to his room every midday with a bottle for company. So it left Ruth and me very much to our own devices. I don't think I've ever been happier.

My duties included chopping wood for the evening fire. Wood hauled once a month from the coast in the open-back Land Cruiser and trailer, great sand-blasted stumps and shattered limbs from far-off places, stranded on the beach. Sometimes timber from ships' decks, swept overboard in storms.

I picked up a really big splinter in the first week of Ruth's stay, deep in the web between thumb and forefinger. I couldn't hold, let alone swing the axe and I couldn't put my shirt back on to show it to Ruth in the kitchen. But eventually I had to. She was as cool and efficient as always, put those cool smooth hands on my shoulders and pressed me down onto a chair. The shock of that brief contact made me forget the pain I was in, but she turned and bustled off, returning with ice, disinfectant, plaster and a darning needle.

There followed a long session of probing and picking at the stubborn sliver and I bore it as stoically as only a man can who wants to prolong contact with a dream. When at last she got it out, I was disappointed. I wanted it to be the size of a pencil, but by now I was sweating rivers. Ruth took a tea-towel and briskly dried off my chest and shoulders as I busied myself with the fit of the plaster and tried to control my breathing. And my heart-beat. Then she gathered up the things and left. That day, I chopped more wood than we needed for a week and almost drowned her plants.

Nirvana changed from the moment Bernsman tramped up the six stone steps to the stoep. Herr Hoffman was nowhere to be seen, which was probably as well, considering the state he was in these days. But Ruth had appeared in the doorway at the sound of the Kombi and was waiting for the guest as I wrestled his cases up the incline. I wasn't too busy to note my passenger bending over the outstretched hand. Ruth flushed, but looked pleased and a familiar feeling started at the crown of my head and spread down my body. I recognised it for what it was but somehow managed to control it. As I passed the two of them

and headed for the room prepared for our guest, he was still holding her hand, and I had to look away in case my face betrayed me.

Two weeks alone in a desolate but beautiful place with a lovely woman can do things to simple people. Like me. Ruth was unattainable, but that made little difference to how I felt about her.

Bernsman accepted a cold lunch set out on the stoep by Ruth, consuming it leisurely and staring out across the flatness to where the nearest Spitzkop rose abruptly out of the desert floor. He jerked his chin at it and lit a slim cheroot when I came to remove his plates. "So...this is the famous Spitz Koppe? Have you climbed them all?"

"No Doctor, I don't climb. I... I'm not good at that sort of thing."

"Ja? Well maybe it is man's work. I have brought my own equipment," he murmured, his attention turning to Ruth who had come out to help me. "And you?" I saw that he was staring directly at her breasts under the snowy T shirt.

"Not a chance!" she laughed, but turned away, so that his gaze dropped to the incredible denim bottom presented by her departure. What I saw in his eyes chilled me and I had difficulty holding the tray.

"Moment, junge..." he said, removing a saucer full of pale seeds of some sort from the tray. "Das ist mir...medizin...ein Starkungsmittel ...flax seeds!" he explained in English with a last smirk at Ruth and a lewd wink and gesture at me. "I take them all the time."

That sensation was back with me, and I heard myself say. "Really? I think we have something here that you should also try. I'll get you some." While my mind said 'that's it, you'll have to go.'

"Ja?" he said, eyebrows rising, denoting more than casual interest." By tomorrow? I will climb tomorrow...although this little hill of yours will not take long. I like to take chances - go fast. I have climbed the Matterhorn, you know? With others of course. Here I do it alone ...Allein, sie kennen?"

"I'll try this afternoon," I said leaving the table to him and his ego. Ruth was preparing vegetables for the evening when I brought in the little container of seeds from under my bed. I'd never got round to planting them. In a way, it was a sort of personal test. Daring myself to go back to old habits - the same habits

that had driven me to seek escape out here in the desert. I popped the top and looked at them, rounder than the flax seeds, with a shiny, mottled skin. They looked harmless enough. Ruth said nothing when I scattered a handful in the bottom of a dry pan on the gas stove and heated them. Very carefully, so as not to burn them – just enough to induce the resin to the surface. I'd never done this before. The plant itself had satisfied my needs although it played hell with my judgement.

"Not necessary, you know," Ruth said softly, intent on slicing carrots.

"What?" I asked, startled from my concentration. "What do you know about...?"

"I'm from Malmesbury. You know that. Anyway, I've fixed it." She said rinsing the knife.

"Fixed? Fixed what?" I'd taken the pan off the heat, aware of the tell-tale smell in the air.

She sighed, as one does when tiresome explanations are necessary.

"He's climbing tomorrow. He said he likes to abseil - to rapell down – the best part, he said, reminds him of..." Her voice was muffled as the refrigerator started up again. She resumed.

"I laid out his climbing gear on the spare bed. You've no idea what a Solingen nail-file can do to the safety spring on a carabiner. Both high quality German steel. He has to go!" And turned back to her work.

In later years, I think that was the closest I ever felt to her. Right then, the future seemed very promising.

Mike Job