

The Promise

I thought the humidity was causing me to see things. The white calling card was well weathered and neatly tucked under the driver's side windscreen wiper. What made that so unusual was the fact that it was a hired car and I was on holiday in clammy Singapore. It was the October-November inter-monsoon season of 2014.

Unlike in South Africa, shoving things under a car windscreen wiper is just not done in Singapore. Heaven forbid you should get caught chewing bubble gum or worse still, jay walking across Orchard Road.

I wiped sweat from my fingers and retrieved the card from under the wiper blade for a closer look.

LAKE BENGUELLA LODGE

Northern Rhodesia

Vera Johnston

"What the blazes." Nothing in my estimation could have been more utterly out of place, especially in Singapore. I would have bet a million Rand on there being no one in Singapore who even knew where Northern Rhodesia was never mind Lake Benguella Lodge. Northern Rhodesia had disappeared off the map in October 1964.

I tucked the unusual card into my sling bag. Surely no one would ever believe where I found it.

I have never been one for taking photographs wherever I go on holiday. I don't own a camera. What I do is wear a leather sling bag that hangs across my chest. I do this because I collect unusual souvenirs like the strange calling card for instance.

I have a stone collected from Sentosa Island, a swizzle stick from the revolving restaurant, and a few peanut shells from The Long Bar at Raffles, home of the Singapore Sling.

My childhood sweetheart Sara and I started the crazy hobby of collecting odd things at the tender age of seven. We had been next-door neighbours ever since we could remember.

Our hobby was something very private and it often annoyed our parents because we brought home so much indiscriminate junk. But it was a challenge to see which one of us could collect the most unusual item. Sara won time and time again. I didn't mind; I loved the way she threw her arms into the air and did a little jig.

Hardly a day went by that Sara and I were not apart. She was a petite blonde girl with the bluest eyes in the world and a smile that made me wonder how it was possible that she liked me. I on the other hand was slightly pudgy with brown hair and a keen sense of humour. We grew up together in Jeffrey's Bay and even attended the same junior school and sat in the same classroom.

At the start of high school, Sara and I officially became sweethearts and secretly promised each other we would never break up.

"Sara Jane Lessing do you solemnly promise to be my wife one day when I am an engineer?"

"Yes I will Oliver Frankie Temple I solemnly promise as soon as I own my own hotel."

Our parents had resigned themselves to the two of us being married one day.

But at age sixteen her father was suddenly promoted to a very senior post in England. Our world came crushing down around us. The exciting future we had been dreaming about for years was ended in an instant.

We begged and pleaded with her parents but our cries fell on deaf ears. When we said our final goodbyes we vowed that one day we would keep our solemn promises to each other.

We wrote to each other religiously and each reply from her was stained with her tears and sealed with a lipstick kiss. I truly lived from one letter to the next.

Inexplicably, the letters suddenly stopped coming. I didn't know what to believe. I just kept on writing to her in the frantic hope that one of my letters would be answered. But that never happened. I never stopped hoping that maybe one day we would meet again.

It has been almost fifty years since Sara left.

Notwithstanding my age many are the times when I thought I had caught sight of her in a crowded room and my heart leapt with joy. But it always ended in disappointment and heartache and often embarrassment.

When I dream about Sara she still has blue eyes and golden locks.

My family and friends have given up on me. In their minds I am just a hopeless case. Nobody will ever take Sara's place in my heart. And, I guess at sixty-five years of age, it doesn't seem like anybody ever will.

My cottage in Jeffrey's Bay where I have retired has taken on the appearance of a walk-in scrapbook. Each piece of travel junk has a tiny label pasted underneath depicting its origin and date of retrieval from an empty glass, a trashcan or the side of the road. No item was an official souvenir of the country visited. Each was a time capsule because it was a tactile reminder of my visit to that place at that time.

I have travelled far and wide on business and leisure over the past forty years always hoping for a glimpse of Sara while adding to my peculiar collection.

However, the strange calling card from Singapore remained the one thing that occupied prominence in my mind. What on earth had Vera Johnston been doing in Singapore and what made her think that she could elicit business from Singapore? And, of all things, by stuffing a calling card under a windscreen wiper? It seemed such a bizarre thing to have done.

After having puzzled over the mysterious calling card for a number of months, I finally decided to contact the Lodge. But, to my dismay I discovered that looking for a telephone number in the far northern reaches of Zambia was a fruitless exercise. A Google search was out of the question. These revelations left me even more bewildered about Vera Johnston's motives.

My piqued curiosity got the better of me. I eventually made up my mind to investigate in person. Having no commitments to anything or anyone I booked a ticket on South African Airways to Kasama the nearest town to Lake Bangweulu. From Kasama it was approximately forty kilometres to the Lodge.

I had no idea what I would find. But what the heck, I reasoned that I had nothing to lose.

The flight was pleasant enough and I had an opportunity to add a discarded half completed Sudoku puzzle to my sling bag. Kasama airport was a real surprise. I did not expect to see anything so modern and up to date. To my utter surprise there was a bus outside with: Bangweulu Lodge Courtesy Bus painted on its side,

parked in the pick-up zone. The driver was happy to let me pay for a fare if I promised to make a reservation once we arrived at the Lodge.

I have learned over the years not to build up expectations about a place before arriving. Invariably disappointment follows. Had I indulged myself in building a high expectation of Lake Benguella Lodge, my expectations would have fallen hopelessly short. It turned out to be nothing short of a paradise with twelve luxury double rooms and outstanding guest facilities overlooking the magnificent Lake Benguella. It was Africa with arms open wide. I had never travelled into Africa before and instantly fell in love with its raw immenseness.

I secretly patted myself on the back. "Well done my boy," I whispered, "this could turn out to be better than I anticipated."

There were moments when I was forced to remind myself that I was not there for a holiday. I had come to solve a mystery. I booked a room for a one-night stay and asked if I could be taken to the airport after breakfast the following day. The hotel agreed and I established myself in my spacious room. Afterwards I went down to reception to start my enquiry.

"Good afternoon I am Oliver Temple."

"Yes Mr Temple can I help you?"

"Yes if it is not too much trouble. May I have a word with Vera Johnston please," I said fingering her calling card in case I was asked for it.

"I beg your pardon?" I could see my request had struck a chord. The receptionist put her hand to her mouth. "I think I may have misheard you could you repeat that?"

Her reaction should have alerted me but I repeated my request.

"Mr Temple, Vera Johnston died a long time ago. She was the original owner of the lodge." She pointed to a painting hanging in a prominent position in the terrace dining room. "That is a picture of her thirty-five years ago shortly before she died."

I must have looked really stupid standing there with my gaping mouth. I turned the card over in my hands as if it was a dud cheque I had just tried to cash. "But I have her calling card," I mumbled feeling rather foolish.

"Oh yes?" She seemed genuinely interested and examined the card carefully.

"It is her card alright."

"I found it under the wiper blade of my hired car when I was in Singapore four months ago."

"That is very strange indeed," she replied. "Mr Temple, Vera was in Singapore when she died thirty-five years ago. So how on earth is it possible that a mere four months ago you somehow found her calling card on your hired car's windscreen?"

"What are the odds?" All I could do was shake my head.

"Quite frankly it is downright spooky," said the receptionist. "You may want to have a chat with the new owner. She is right over there in the Sun Lounge. She is the one in the wheel chair. She was Vera's best friend and when Vera died she acquired the hotel."

"That's very interesting but right now I need some time to myself to try and fathom this all out."

"I understand. If I can be of any help you know where to find me."

"Thank you that's very kind." Right then what I needed was a drink and then I wanted to find a reason: Why me? It was a hired car anyone could have hired it instead of me. I could have chosen to park somewhere else far away from where I did park the car. Maybe I was meant to travel all the way to Lake Benguella, but why? Surely not just to be told Vera Johnston died thirty-five years earlier. Where was the purpose in that?

"Can I get you a drink sir?" The waiter dressed in white tunic and shorts with leather sandals smiled and neatly placed a platter with a selection of nuts and crisps before me.

"Thanks. A Bells and soda please."

"Very good sir."

My drink arrived a while later and I thanked the waiter and ordered another. I placed the calling card on the table and sipped my drink. On second thoughts, I knocked it back without the mixer and felt the fire make its way down my throat. I felt angry with myself that I had allowed my curiosity to get the better of me. I should have ignored the damn card.

While I was noisily swirling the ice in my second drink the woman in the wheel chair silently repositioned herself in the terraced dining room under the portrait of Vera Johnston. The waiter brought her a tall glass of orange juice.

I did not hear her thank the waiter and it made me wonder if she had just spoken very softly.

I let my eyes wander aimlessly around my surroundings while my mind wrestled with the mystery of Vera's calling card. My eyes came to rest on a reflection in the window. Something made me take special notice as the woman in the wheelchair picked up a crumpled silver wrapper from the vacated table in front of her and put the item in a sling bag lying on her lap.

I spilled my drink on its way to my mouth. Something icy crawled up my spine and I felt the hair on the back of my head prickle. My heart lurched into my throat and my hand was shaking so much I could hardly signal the waiter.

"Yes sir, would you like me to replace that drink?"

I drew him close so that I speak in a low voice.

"Excuse me, do you perhaps know the name of the lady sitting behind me?"

"Why yes sir," whispered the waiter. "She is the owner of the lodge she is Miss Sara Lessing. Shall I introduce you to her?"

"T-thank you. N-no I would like to do that myself."

"Very good sir. Are you okay sir you have gone awfully pale."

I drank what was left of my drink because my heart was in my mouth. I slowly got to my feet and steadied myself. It took several seconds to prepare my mind for what was about to become the most incredible moment in my life.

Could it be my Sara? Will she remember me? What do I say?

A soft voice behind me stopped me in my tracks.

"Excuse me Mr Temple?"

I swung around to see who it was.

"Mr Temple I am Rob Peterson I am the manager. May I have a word with you before you approach Sara?"

"Y-yes of course." I was so emotional right then that I did not comprehend what the man wanted.

"I can see you are puzzled. Please follow me I will explain fully." He ushered me into his office off the reception area. "You already know Angela Foreman our receptionist," he said. "Please take a seat no doubt you are wondering what this is all about. Our waiter warned us you seemed unwell and then Angela told me your name. That is when the penny dropped."

"Excuse me but what 'penny?'"

"Well we will get right down to it." He looked across at the receptionist and nodded.

“Mr Temple,” said the manager. “When we heard your name we wondered if it were humanly possible that you were the same Oliver Temple that Sara had spoken of so often? We were thrown off course when you flourished the calling card of Vera Johnston the previous owner of the Benguella Lodge. But then we observed how you appeared to recognised Sara in the wheelchair and were about to announce yourself to her.”

“I beg your pardon? What are you trying to tell me?”

“Mr Temple there is no easy way of putting this, but Sara had a stroke five years ago and she has difficulty in articulating. Sadly that’s not all. The stroke affected her left side and restricted her to a wheel chair. She is able to use her right arm and she speaks with great difficulty. We didn’t want you to be taken by surprise. We also did not want Sara to be shocked by your sudden appearance. Sara means everything to us here at the Lodge. We regard ourselves as one big family and Sara is still head of that family.”

My impulse was to rush over to Sara and put my arms around her. Years of heartache and longing grabbed at me. “We last saw each other when we were sixteen years old.” I explained as best I could through the tears. “We grew up together and went to junior school and high school together. We were sweethearts and promised ourselves to each other for life. She has always been the only one.”

“She spoke of you often Mr Temple. In fact it feels as if we have known you all our lives.”

“When her parents immigrated to England in 1976 Sara took my heart with her. She and I wrote for over one year and then the letters suddenly stopped. It was about then that I stopped living. I had no idea why she stopped writing. All sorts of horrible scenarios presented in my mind.”

“Mr Temple there is something we have to tell you that is not going to be pleasant for you to hear but it may help you understand.”

“My word what more can there possibly be?” I asked feeling utterly devastated.

“I understand your consternation Mr Temple but this is going to explain away a huge misunderstanding.”

“Please go on.” I leaned forward in my seat.

“What we have been led to understand over the years, is the following: Sara went to England with her parents in 1980

supposedly on account of her father being appointed to a high position.”

“Supposedly?”

“Yes Mr Temple that is where the story of Sara Lessing takes a macabre twist. It seems Sara’s father was not who he claimed to be.”

“W-what are you saying?”

“George Lessing was not destined to fill a senior management role in a respectable auditing firm in England. He was deported to face crimes in England for which he was jailed. Sara and her mother were so ashamed that they withdrew from society and that meant from you as well.”

“This cannot be true surely?”

“Sadly Mr Temple history doesn’t lie.”

“Dear heavens, Sara must have been devastated. How on earth did she and her mother deal with everything?”

“Sara’s mother committed suicide when Sara was eighteen years old.”

“Oh my word! What happened to Sara?” I did not realise I was standing.

‘Please be seated Mr Temple there is more.’

‘More?’

“The poor child took it very hard. She got mixed up in an unsympathetic crowd. This is going to be hard to swallow Mr Temple. Sara took to drugs and wasted most of her young life. She made a recovery in her late twenties and then made her way to Korea where she taught English. Vera Johnston came across Sara in Seoul and they became firm friends.”

“I was beginning to wonder where Vera came into the picture.”

“She convinced Sara to come with her to Zambia and she has been here ever since. It wasn’t too long afterwards that we began to hear all about a certain Oliver Temple. Vera made a promise to Sara that she would do all in her power to find you and reunite the two of you. But Vera died before that happened and Sara took over as owner.”

“Oh wow, so Sara bought Benguella Lodge?”

“Not actually, Vera bequeathed the Lodge to Sara. Everything went well for many years and then one day Sara fell ill and had a stroke and the rest is history. Sara spends her days where you saw

her this morning. We take her for 'walks' down to the lake and when we have management meetings she listens patiently. She can communicate; all you have to do is be patient while she finds the right words. Of course she gets tired very quickly."

I was unable to speak. I am sure I must have looked a teary mess.

"We will leave you on your own Mr Temple while you gather up your thoughts. When you are ready we'll take you to Sara."

"T-thank you. Thank you." I left the manager's office and went for a walk down to the edge of the water and found a spot to sit down. I was alone with the francolin scurrying around at the water's edge. I put my head in my hands and wept like a child.

I didn't return to the Lodge until it was dark and Sara had obviously retired for the day. I went directly to my room and turned off the light and lay on my bed in my shorts. The evening was very warm. I left the glass sliding doors open to allow the sounds of Africa to filter through my room. My mind was a mess of emotion and the whisky I had poured from the bar fridge wasn't helping. All I wanted to do was hold Sara in my arms and never let go of her. But was it the right thing to do given the circumstances?

I went down to breakfast really early glad to get out of my room and desperate for a cup of coffee.

Sara was seated in the dining room facing the lake. The sky was turning from orange to pale yellow in anticipation of the rising sun. The cry of a fish eagle rang out across the still water. It was going to be another hot day.

Sara looked so relaxed and serene sitting there. Surely it had to be her favourite time of day? Someone must have assisted her with her snow-white hair and with getting dressed. Whoever it had been had done so with great compassion and care. She was dressed in light blue slacks and a canary yellow top.

Did I have the right to present myself to her? For a long moment I interrogated my motives. What would I say as an opener?

I swallowed hard and with shaking legs I moved across to her table. She looked up at me with the bluest eyes and smiled. She would not have recognised me from thirty-five years ago. I was slim now and wore my hair very short. I also wore spectacles. I was struggling for breath.

“H-hello good morning do you mind if I join you for breakfast?” Her movement was slow and she raised her hand slightly and nodded.

“G-good m-orning. I w-would l-love the company. Do I k-know y-ou sir?”

Instead of responding I sat down slowly and deliberately reached across the table in slow motion allowing her time to track what I was I was about to do. I picked up a small paper napkin and opened my shoulder bag while she observed my every move. I let the napkin fall gently inside.

Sara stared at the sling bag for a long moment and then her eyes tracked across to my face. A deep frown began to form. Her eyes slowly tracked back to my face and then to my shoulder sling. We made eye contact and she saw there were tears in my eyes. The look of confusion on her face began to crumble little bit by little bit. A slight tremor crept into her hand as the tiny spark of recognition long since dead slowly came to life.

I smiled through my tears and nodded slowly as I reached for her hand. She looked down at our hands for a moment and then she looked full in my face.

“Olly?” Her voice was barely audible.

“It’s me Sara,” I whispered as I squeezed her hand

“Olly?” Sara gasped as tears began to form in her eyes.

“Yes Sara my darling it is me...Olly.”

I used my cotton napkin to gently dab her tears.

“H-ow did y-ou find m-e?”

“Vera sent me a message,” I said taking both her hands in mine.

“V-vera?”

“She sent me a message but it took a long time for it to reach me.”

“V-vera d-died Olly,” said Sara clearly perplexed as to how it was possible that her friend had contacted me.

“Yes my dear I know.” I thought it best to wait a while before I attempt to explain how Vera’s calling card happened to be on my hired vehicle in Singapore.

“I w-wanted t-o wait Olly but I didn’t w-want you to be a-shamed of me.”

“I never gave up my darling...I never gave up. We made a promise to each other do you remember?”

“I do r-remember with all m-my heart Olly.”

I went on my knees in front of Sara’s wheel chair and held her hands in mine. The portrait of Vera Johnston looked down on us. Unbeknown to the two of us the manager and all the staff had congregated behind us and there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

“Sara Jane Lessing will you marry me?” Those blue eyes filled with tears and that unforgettable smile spread across her face as she squeezed my hands.

“Y-yes my darling Olly I w-will marry you.”

Loud cheers broke out behind us as the staff engulfed the two of us with hugs and congratulations.

I was sure that in that special moment all the angels in Heaven were giving each other a ‘High Five.’ No doubt Vera was there too.

Roland F Willis