In Ethiopia, Once

Ron Singer

‘How did the rest of your week go, George?’ The question was asked by Edna, a South African journalist whom I had interviewed on Monday. It was now Sunday.

‘Well, on the one hand… ’ I gestured, ‘I did three more interviews. But on the other… ’ a second gesture, ‘I was almost eaten by a lion.’ Everyone laughed, and I explained. The anecdote featured a malfunctioning car window in a game park on the outskirts of Nairobi. The hot-and-foul breathed lion had cased the car and its occupants, then walked off.

‘Must have been a vegetarian,’ said Devi, Bill’s waggish roommate.

Bill was the mild-mannered son of my dentist (father) and eye doctor (mother). Reared in an affluent New Jersey ‘burb minutes from the city, he was a little Clark-Kentish. Devi, an Indian-American from the same place, was tall, thin, and wired. Old friends, they both now worked for a UN group monitoring the distribution of food and other aid at refugee camps across East Africa and the Horn: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia). Or, as Devi quipped, ‘we make sure no more than 90% is stolen.’ This job required frequent trips to places where it was too dangerous for them to live. Since Edna was the Reuters rep for the Horn, operating, like the roommates, out of Nairobi, she, too, travelled a lot. Edna was Bill’s significant other.

The four of us were relaxing at the pool in Bill and Devi’s apartment complex in Westlands, an upscale suburb of Nairobi. We were enjoying *apres*-squash drinks. Bill was in his early thirties, and Devi and Edna looked about the same, which made them all a bit more than half my age.

‘What happened with that guy I introduced you to?’ Edna asked, referring to the Managing Editor of *African Zeitgeist*, an important news weekly. If it is not obvious by now, I had come to this part of the world to write an article about local journalists.

‘Well, not to make too fine a point of it, it was a fiasco.’

‘Oops,’ said Edna. ‘Sorry. What went wrong?’ So I told them a second story, this one much more elaborate than the lion story.

I had telephoned and made a date for a working lunch with the editor, a Kenyan Asian, but after that everything went wrong. First, some pickpockets on the bus I took from my guest house had a go (unsuccessful) at my wallet. Flustered and hot, I then had trouble finding the restaurant, a steak place in the downtown business district that the editor had suggested. Since I hadn’t quite caught the name, which turned out to be ‘Prime Eats,’ I wandered around for a while, until the penny dropped. Luckily, or maybe not, I still managed to arrive early, but only because the editor was late, which I excused because I knew he was a busy man.

After he had bustled in and spotted me in the dining room, we shook hands, and he moved us to the bar. While I ate and anticipated the interview, he ignored me, watching cricket on the big TV, gobbling down some food, guzzling a beer, and chain-smoking. Perhaps, his frantic behaviour stemmed from the fact that the match, some kind of cup final, involved his original homeland, India.
As soon as it ended, looking at his watch, he suggested — then, insisted — that, since I was the one who had initiated the interview, I should pick up the check. Outraged, but reluctant to create a scene, I acceded as gracefully as possible. Given that Nairobi restaurants can be expensive, the check luckily turned out to be manageable.

As we were nodding our very cool farewells out on the sidewalk, he seemed to notice how angry I was. At any rate, he turned on the charm. ‘But, please, George, you must come to my home this Sunday for lunch. We can do the interview right after we eat. Inshallah, I’ll call you that morning and pick you up in my car.’ But he never did call.

‘I thought the plan sounded good,’ I concluded, ‘especially the inshallah part. Isn’t that some kind of oath?’

‘Well, no, George,’ Devi explained, ‘not exactly.’ Bill and Edna looked amused. ‘Let me preface this by saying that I am, myself, of partly Muslim extraction. Okay? “Inshallah,” or “God willing”, is what we Muslims sometimes say instead of really doing anything, for example, “Inshallah, I shall not have any more children,” says the pregnant mother of twenty.’

‘Oh.’

‘What a jerk!’ Bill said. Edna just shook her head, and we changed the subject.

So that was how I came to be pool-side that Sunday afternoon. Rather than call the rude editor again, I had opted for some r & r.

While I had been telling my story, a genial young African Kenyan waiter served us a second round of beer and soft drinks. There were four other parties at pool-side that afternoon, two white, one Asian, and one African. By chance, although racial mixing is common among better-off Kenyans, ours was the only racially mixed group. The Africans were a family of five, all fat. In Kenya, there is a piquant saying for what happens when your ethnic group comes to power: ‘It’s our turn to eat.’ While the mother supervised the children, the father swam laps in the small pool, which he had to himself, splashing water onto the apron with his vigorous strokes.

Although only Devi and I had played squash, we had all been into the pool. After Bill signed for the drinks, we sat at our table in the broiling sun, the four of us politely trying to edge our chairs under the too-small umbrella. In an ersatz way, it was like the scramble for Africa.

For a while, we chatted about this and that. For the benefit of Devi, who had not heard it before, I summarised my intended article, mentioning that, before coming to Nairobi, I had spent ten days each in Dar es Salaam and Addis Ababa. Then, Devi and I reprised our fairly even squash match, which he had won. He was good; I was — am — too old for the game. Bill had watched from a small gallery above the court, so the account was for the sole benefit of Edna, who had arrived afterwards. It turned out that, like many South Africans, she was, herself, a squash player, and she and Devi conducted a mild pissing contest about what might happen if they were to play, an eventuality they had previously broached.

‘Who do you think would win, George?’ joked Edna, who was wearing a black one-piece bathing suit, and was the fittest-looking member of our party.

‘It depends who’s better,’ I non-answered.

‘The wisdom of Solomon,’ Devi said.
After that, he and Bill told me more about their work. Since many visitors to this part of the world pass through Nairobi, and since they had obviously given the spiel before, they sprinkled in a few well-rehearsed, harrowing details about violence and deprivation. Mostly, however, they stuck to facts and generalisations, their tone bureaucratically dispassionate.

This was obviously the kind of conversation that, sooner or later, falls into the doldrums, and, after ten or fifteen minutes, it did. The reader may be surprised by how I got it moving again, so let me blame Edna.

‘Had you ever been to this part of the world before, George?’ she asked.

A lucky gambit, for I had, indeed, been to East Africa, visiting several countries over six weeks in the early 1970’s. This was a parent-sponsored, post-college trip, all by myself, since it was meant to be (and was) an adventure.

So I answered that, yes, I had been there, and offered a few details: the bar in Mombasa where I narrowly avoided a fight with a British commando on r & r from Yemen, the dusty streets and open-air food shops of Addis, and so on. My sparse travelogue seemed to arouse Edna’s journalistic instincts.

‘Come on, George,’ she said, ‘those are the kinds of stories everyone tells. Give us something a little more … interesting.’

This posed an ‘interesting’ problem, which I quickly considered. Much of what had been most interesting about the trip was, for various reasons, unrepeatable, at least in a pool-side conversation on a Sunday afternoon in Nairobi in early 2011. How about my newly acquired Tanzanian drinking buddy, a college student who went on about how he was the only person in sub-Saharan Africa who did not believe in juju (magic), and whose mother replied to the letter I sent him six months later, informing me that, the week after I had left, her son had contracted a mysterious fever and died?

Or how about my encounter with the gorgeous fifteen-year old whom I met at a dance club in Kisumu, on Lake Victoria, and had sex with five or six times (careful here, time and age distort this kind of thing) during a single, delightful night, all without benefit, or even mention, of contraception? Nor did the girl ask for money or anything else. Of course, I took the initiative, as I was perhaps expected to do, buying her breakfast the next morning and handing her a substantial, but not ridiculous, sum, which she accepted without protest. But those are the kinds of stories I don’t think you can tell these days. Whatever else you may think of it, the one I did tell was politically correct.

‘Okay,’ I said bluntly, ‘I’ll tell you a story about Ethiopia. There are two parts. I’ll start with the first one. But I have to warn you, this isn’t going to be what you would call “cute,” like the lion story. So, Shall I?’ Looking interested, they all nodded, so I bulled ahead, practically uninterrupted.

‘Now that I think of it, this is more of an image than a story. It comes from a very long, slow, hot train ride through the Ethiopian desert from Addis to Dire Dawa — do you know where that is?’ They all did. ‘Anyway, sitting directly opposite me was a woman with a tiny child. Although she was wearing what I remember as elegant clothing, an embroidered shawl, and so on …’ (Bill complimented my memory) ‘… both she and the child were emaciated and drenched in sweat. In fact, they looked as if they might be starving. The child — a baby, I think, although I had no idea how old it was — seemed barely alive.'
‘During the ten or twelve hour trip, the woman made no effort to nurse the baby or to give it any other food. She just stared into space. Come to think of it, I guess you could say this was another example of “inshallah.” The detail I remember most vividly was that big flies kept swarming over the child’s face, which the woman made no effort to brush away. I’m not sure why that sticks in my mind.

Of course, there are also many things I don’t remember, but still wonder about. Had I brought any food along for the journey and, if so, did I take it out and offer to share it? In the long hours during which we sat across from each other, did the woman and I make eye contact? Who were our fellow-passengers, and what were they doing?

The only other thought that does stick in my mind was that this mother and child were travelling toward their deaths. Did she get off the train when I did, at Dire Dawa? Because I met death there, myself. Or does that sound too melodramatic?’

On that note, I finally wound down. As you can imagine, this anecdote, or whatever it was, was something of a conversation-stopper. Everyone had been listening raptly, but, when I finished, there was a sort of stunned silence. Then, Bill recited some facts about hunger, poverty and illness. Devi said nothing. Edna mentioned the pathetic beggars she always encountered in Addis and other cities of the Horn: the blind, the orphaned, the limbless, the starving, those who were aged and destitute, and those whose limbs were twisted by polio or other crippling maladies. These comments, with their ‘nothing has changed’ theme, were followed by another silence, which Edna once again broke.

‘Well, George,’ she said, shielding her eyes from the sun, ‘that was jolly! But you said there were two stories. Is Part Two more … cheerful? Has to be, eh? Want to tell us that one now?’ She shined a high-wattage smile on me, and, sheepishly, the roommates also smiled.

‘Well, no,’ I said, embarrassed, but managing a tiny smile of my own. ‘Actually, the sequel is just as bad. Suppose I save it for another time. But, if you like,’ I added, ‘I can recite the ten plagues again Egypt.’

‘Just the first two or three, George,’ suggested Devi. ‘Skip the frogs, please.’

This little … whatever… did the trick, barely, moving the conversation back onto the expected tracks of, first, some hectic banter; then, a few further thoughtful and sober, but not too gloomy, reflections on Africa’s enduring problems; and, finally, out onto the broad and tranquil plain of ordinary chatter. By now, the afternoon, still very hot, was turning into evening, so the talk turned to dinner plans, in which I was included.

When we left the pool, Edna hurried home to catch up on some e-mailing. The roommates and I went up to their flat, where we showered and dressed. At seven, I said goodbye to Devi, who intended to go dancing later on ‘with some ladies.’ Bill and I were dropped at the restaurant by a genial young taxi driver whom they had on call. We were joined almost immediately by Edna, who came in her own car. When she generously offered to drive us both home after the meal, Bill gave the driver the rest of the night off.

It was a very posh Indian place (no smoking), recommended by some friends of Devi’s, and new to Edna, Bill, and, of course, me. When we had been seated and were studying the huge menus, an Indian family of four, ostentatiously rich, bustled in and was shown to a nearby table. As the Kenyan-African waiter began pulling out
'Just a moment!' he barked. 'This table is unsatisfactory. Have the manager come over here immediately! I specifically reserved a corner table next to the verandah. Didn’t he tell you that, you fool?'

The waiter muttered something and sprinted off, presumably to find the manager, who was nowhere in sight. Many of the other diners, including Edna, looked very embarrassed. To my great surprise, mild-mannered Bill went ballistic.

'I fucking hate it,' he spluttered, sotto voce, ‘when rich people throw their weight around like that. Some of these fucking bastards are really uncivilised.’ As he spoke, Bill’s red hands gripped the edge of the red tablecloth, and, for an exciting moment, I wondered if he might be about to spring to his feet, change into his Superman costume, charge the martinet, and escalate the verbal attack, maybe even punch him in the nose.

Luckily for everyone, I suppose, there was no phone booth. Anyway, before it could come to that, the flustered (Indian) manager glided up, as if on roller skates. Apologising profusely, he escorted the half-placated complainant away, presumably to a more suitable table. The wife had assumed an imperious air of her own, and, apparently used to their father’s tantrums, the children obediently trailed after. The occupants of the other tables overcame their embarrassment and resumed what they had been doing before the altercation, or whatever it was. The offending server was nowhere in sight. The entire episode had lasted no more than two or three minutes.

'I’m really sorry, folks,' said Bill, still angry, ‘but I fucking hate that kind of behaviour.’

'So do I,’ said Edna, matter-of-factly.

'Ditto,’ said I, and we returned to our menus.

Soon, we ordered. The hors d’oeuvres were promptly served, and we began to eat. Everything was excellent. I like Indian food, and this was at least as good as any I had eaten in New York, or anywhere else.

'How about that sequel now, Bill?’ Edna suggested, when the waiter had replaced the small dishes with huge ones, and was refilling our beer glasses. ‘The Dire Dawa story?’

‘You sure?’ I asked. They both nodded. If I need to explain myself, the proximate cause of Part Two of my Ethiopian adventure must have been Bill’s muffled outburst. Of course, my pool-side account of the train ride had prepared the way. Anyway, Edna was (again) the instigator.

Part Two was told in stages over the next hour, during which we finished the meal, dishes were cleared, and negotiations conducted over the check. For a while, this interrupted narrative worked well. Most of the story must have been fairly amusing, since my audience’s interest never seemed to flag. I’ll tell the bulk of it without their comments, which were few, anyway.

'Sometime very late, our train pulled into Dire Dawa, which was the terminus. When we had wearily disembarked, and the other passengers had gone their way, I realized I had a problem.

'As part of my itinerary of adventure, I had been travelling from town to town without bothering to make hotel reservations. I would just turn up, walk around, and
pick a place. Decent rooms always seemed available; prices, manageable. I travelled light, with only a few changes of clothing and a camera, but no camping gear. Of course, in the pre-ATM era, my most important possession was my book of travellers’ cheques. Midway through the trip, I still had almost $1,000 worth. The cheques were deep inside a zipped pocket in my cargo pants, nestled against my thigh. I also had some cash, of course, in another zipped pocket.

‘By now, I think it must have been ten or eleven, and the ‘town’ looked like a long dusty street lined by small, darkened buildings, none of which was obviously a hotel. Luckily, there was a moon, although I can’t remember how full. After standing there indecisively for a few moments, I decided to follow my nose.

‘Five minutes later, I reached a two-story building made of mud bricks, I think, with a sign above the door, in Amharic, and a faint light glowing through a window. I banged on the door, feet scuttled, and it was opened by a tall, thin young man wrapped in a white cotton shawl and carrying a small oil lamp.

“Hotel?” I asked.
“Yes,” he nodded.
“Room?” I asked.
“Yes,” he nodded.
He beckoned, and I followed him through some winding corridors past several closed doors. Stopping at one, he turned the knob and gestured me in.

“This one?” he asked, in English, shining the light into the room. “Two birr.” (As I recall, this was then the equivalent of about twelve cents, U.S.)

It was an empty, windowless room, about fifty or sixty square feet, with a dirt floor and a hole in one corner. The room was redolent of the uses previous occupants had made of the hole.

“Better room?” I asked.
He beckoned again, and we wound through the corridor to another door, which he also opened. Inside was the same room, but with a rolled-up raffia mat standing in a corner.

“Four birr,” he said.
“No, thanks,” I said. “Any more rooms?”
“No, same,” he said.

‘With the optimism — rashness — of youth, I reasoned that, if there was one hotel in town, there must be other, better ones down the road. He shrugged and showed me back to the front door, closing it softly behind me.

‘Adrift once again in the desert night, out on the long road, I proceeded, meeting no one. For a while, there were no more lights or signs, either, and I began to consider turning back. But I fell into one of those “just a little farther” moods, and trudged on. After a while, the road dipped, and I crossed a sandy patch about twenty feet wide, which I assumed was a dry river bed. Up on the other side, after five more minutes, I came to another sign and another dim light. Again, I knocked, and, again, a man with a lamp came out. I can’t remember much about this man. Maybe, he was older than the first one.

“Room?” I asked.
“Yes,” he said, and we repeated the routine from the first hotel. The only differences were that this one had no rooms with mats, and the rooms may have smelled even worse.

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“No, thanks,” I said, without asking the price. By then, even my sense of adventure was wearing thin. It had been a very, very long day. So I trudged back down the road and re-crossed the dry river bed. By now, clouds seemed to be rolling in, and the moon was playing peek-a-boo with them. I woke up the first guy and took the deluxe, paying in advance.

When he unravelled the mat, the equivalent of turning down the covers in a five-star accommodation, it looked as if it had never been used. When I lay down on it, at the far corner from the hole, it seemed no softer than I imagined the dirt floor would have been. But it felt clean, and crinkled reassuringly. Exhausted as I was, I managed a fair night’s sleep, wrapped against the desert night in my one jacket and all my spare pants and sweaters.

I paused. By now, Edna, Bill and I had finished stuffing ourselves and had declined dessert. As we waited for the check to be divided onto our three credit cards, I sensed that I had led us into a — another — conversational cul de sac. It lay just ahead, a surprising reversal of what, so far, could have been one of those amusing anecdotes which, I have read, are favoured by ‘old Africa hands.’

‘Want to guess what happened?’ I asked. ‘This is the bad part.’

‘Can’t imagine. Let’s have it,’ said Edna.

‘Sock it to us, George,’ said Bill.

‘To make this quick, what happened was that, sometime during the night, it rained. Very early the next morning, when I was packed and ready to leave, I looked for the attendant, to say goodbye. Making my way to the entrance, I saw him standing in the now-open doorway.

‘Outside, a hullabaloo was in progress. People were shouting and running back and forth along the road. Traffic, consisting mostly of big trucks, was lined up as far as I could see, but in only one direction, away from the train station.

“What happened?” I asked the hotel man.

“Go and see,” he said, pointing ahead. “Big rains in north.”

Threading my way through the crowds, I approached the river bed. It was now a torrent. A bunch of men with a heavy rope were tugging at a big truck that had intrepidly tried to cross and made it just far enough to drop its front end into the rushing water. For a minute or two, I stood and watched, shaking my head.

Of course, if I had chosen the other hotel, I would have been marooned. For how long, I had no idea, but since the daily train left at eight a.m., I would presumably have missed it. Why would that have mattered? After all, I had no fixed itinerary. Somehow, though, the thought of being stranded across the river in Dire Dawa, cut off from the train station, distressed me.

Later, having eaten some local food at the station, I rode back to Addis, seated across from people who left no impression. As the train chugged along, I felt that I had somehow survived one of those adventures I had come to Africa to experience.’

‘Well,” said Edna, “and so you had.’

‘What’s the bad part?’ asked Bill.

‘Heh, heh,’ I laughed mirthlessly. ‘Sure you want to know? I was told by a fellow passenger that, during the night, a large number of people — hundreds, maybe thousands — had drowned. It seems that many of the homeless took shelter in the warm sand of the river beds, down where the wind did not reach.’

‘And when it rained,’ Edna said, ‘they drowned in the flash floods. As they
must have known they might, at any time. That still happens, you know.’

Bill capped the story. ‘The lives of the poor are a lottery.’

We briefly fell silent, then, each with our own thoughts. While we waited a few more minutes for the credit cards to reappear, my dinner partners drew upon their own experiences to amplify what they had just heard.

Edna recalled an anecdote about the separatist, ethnic-Somali, Ogaden region in Ethiopia. After a visit from a Dutch reporter, those residents who had been brave or rash enough to speak with him had been brutally beaten by Ethiopian soldiers.

Bill told about how, a few months earlier, a Somali warlord’s very lucrative gun-running operation to both sides in that conflict was uncovered by a UN colleague who worked on arms control. Twice, the warlord’s thugs barely missed gunning the man down on a Nairobi street. He was now back home on leave in the UK Bill tapped a forefinger against his temple.

The check settled, we left the restaurant. The night was cool and clear; the sky, full of stars. In her puddle-jumper, Edna drove Bill to his apartment complex. Then, since the next day was a work day and she was not staying over with him, she drove me home to my guest house, which was on a quiet side street not far from her apartment building. When we reached the compound, I got out to ring the bell. The watchman quickly appeared, and opened the gate. I leaned into the car and shook Edna’s hand.

‘Thanks,’ I said, ‘for the ride, for everything. I’m really grate…’

She cut me off. ‘You’re welcome, George, it was a pleasure meeting you. And the story you told us… those people in the train? The flood? …well, that’s how it is, isn’t it? I shan’t soon forget that story. Best of luck with your article.’ She seemed about to say more, but did not.

A bit awkwardly, we shook hands a second time. Then, she backed away from the gate, turned, and bumped off down the dark street toward the main road. I walked quickly into the compound, and the gate clanked shut behind me.