

Chapter Four

Shoes, Boats and a Dangerous Acacia

ONE OF MY FAVOURITE BIKE RIDES took me to the muddy river where lots of wild animals were to be seen quenching their thirst. So visiting the river was always full of incident. I might see a hippo swimming, seemingly unaware of my presence, or perhaps a herd of gazelle quietly drinking from the riverbanks. Of course, such places are not without danger, so I kept my visits clandestine and never mentioned them to my family.

There had been clues as to my whereabouts: both my grandmother and mother noticed that I often returned home barefooted. 'Where have you left your shoes?' they would persistently enquire. I preferred not to lie, so I chose to remain silent on this matter. They were right to be concerned about my frequent loss of footwear. Whenever I went to the river, I would leave the bike at the top of the hill and descend on foot to the riverbank, the slope being too steep to negotiate on two wheels. Beside the river there was a large acacia tree in whose shadow I would sit, remove my shoes and splash my feet in

the water. Then I would carefully place the shoes on the water's surface and watch them drift away with the current, like little boats. I observed that at first the shoes moved slowly on the water, but once they reached the middle of the river they would speed up, floating faster and faster away until they disappeared from view. I managed to lose several pairs of shoes while entertaining myself in this way.

Inevitably, however, my secret was eventually exposed and my visits to the river came to an abrupt end. One day I set off as usual, but, unbeknownst to me, my mother was on my trail. I left my bike on the hill as I normally did, went down to the riverbank and settled in my favourite position beneath the acacia. As I collected stones to throw into the water, I heard a sweet voice calling me:

'Come here, my boy; I want to show you something. Don't run, just come, come!'

To my astonishment I saw my mother standing next to my bike on the hill as she beckoned me to climb up and go to her. Almost in a whisper, she insisted: 'Come, come!'

I got up and moved toward her, slowly climbing the hill. Beyond, I noticed the Land Rover with the driver sitting inside. When I got near her, she suddenly grabbed me and embraced me tightly with great relief. It was clear that something terrifying had happened. With a trembling voice she prompted me to look towards the acacia.

'Look there in the tree. What do you see?' I turned to look towards where I had been a minute earlier... and was shocked to see a leopard lying on a branch of my acacia! There I had been, oblivious to the danger; happily throwing stones into the water, and all the while the predator had been sleeping in the tree above me! Leopards often search for a safe place to rest or sleep by climbing up a tree and lying along a branch.



A CYCLE SAFARI

Sometimes they even drag their dead prey up to ensure that no other animal attempts to steal it.

My mother signalled to the driver to come and get my bike and to load it. We headed to the vehicle and drove back to the house. No one spoke throughout the drive home, which brought home quite clearly the grave danger I had been in.