

Game-Viewing by Pat Mosel

"There it is." Elma pointed across him. "There. I'm sure of it." Thomas stopped the car, keeping his accustomed, impenetrable silence. She was still obstructing his driving after all these years of marriage.

Padded with soft flesh, Elma was wedged between him and the steering wheel now and, if he'd been able to turn to his right he'd have seen that her wiggling finger was aimed at a clump of thorn trees and a tawny shape on a rock in its shade. "Oh, I know it's there. Can't you see?" Her fingers went up to her mouth, a curiously young gesture in a sixty-year-old woman. Then she was physically turning his shoulders in the direction she had been pointing.

He broke his silence. "You haven't told me what it is you've spotted, Elma."

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"Well, you're always saying I talk too much." She gave him a playful tap, which drew no response. He resumed silence, so that she resorted to wrestling with the binoculars.

The animal was a cheetah. Elma met its firebrand's eyes as it lay in the shade, flexing fur paws, bitten and mangy, arrogant, with a head that was too flat on top.

"Well done, old girl," said Thomas. His interest was aroused, and she steadied herself for a long bout of pondering, typical of her husband, by delving into the food basket at her feet, rustling paper and shuffling the contents. The dry veldt was all around them.

“Wonder what a lady like that could be thinking?”

“How do you know it’s female?” she challenged, without interrupting her search for the sucky lemon sweets.

“Seems fairly obvious to me.”

“It could be male.” She was beginning to unload food parcels onto her lap.

“Never seen a male with a frame like that.” He smiled inside.

“Do you think it’s too early for a cup of tea?” But Elma had answered her own question as soon as she had voiced it. Too early. They had eaten only an hour before. They had taken breakfast at crack of dawn on the Mallone’s ruin of a patio; a sizable meal of cereal, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade, brought out by the good-natured Almond whose junior colleague, Peanut, was putting violent energy into scrubbing the broken crazy-paving. The original in-joke of the Mallone servants’ “nutty” names had been passed down through the mists of time, but the family had cultivated an extended version, which it was keen to share with frequent visitors to the farm. Devoid of subtlety, this revolved around Peanut’s apparent lack of sense of survival. He was accident-prone the Mallones said, and added that it was far safer for the household to relegate ‘pea-brained Peanut’ to the garden, even although he suffered attack from curiously live water hoses and vengeful rakes and spades. Thomas suggested that Peanut - whose African name was Sipho - was merely young, and handicapped by uncontrollable physical energy. He would have added, “and the offensive name” if he hadn’t been sure that Elma would accuse him of always siding with the underdog, even to his own detriment, Elma never hesitated to challenge him on this. She enjoyed the Mallone’s sense of humour.

Elma and Thomas appreciated the freshness of the morning; caught the gentle sound of cooing pigeons before the assault of cicadas upon the day. They saw the emerging sun's burning globe, a formidable signal of the blazing heat to come.

Although they'd been born on the African continent, they'd never become used to the heat. Elma felt the weight of too much flesh; her fair skin burning pink and peeling after exposure to the sun. Even a sun hat and dark glasses couldn't prevent her nose from blistering red; "a drunk's nose" she would complain - she who feared the wrath of God in a second drink. Thomas had better luck with his skin type although it had gradually turned a deeper shade, pale brown, tough and dry; and his bald patch, vulnerable. The outdoor life had kept him trim until recently when a small bulge had formed at his belly, as inevitable as the wrinkles on their faces.

It was an easy run to the game park and they met few other cars on their way to the gates where four or five cars were checking in, their occupants bush-happy in loose, light clothing; sporting hats that are better worn than viewed.

A family of elephants across the road, not two kilometres away on the road in; this was the animated message passed around between strangers. Go carefully. Don't get between mother and calf.

Thomas got chatting to a blonde from Johannesburg, while Elma stayed put in the front passenger seat of the car, waiting for him to do whatever it was that had to be done to check in to the game park, regretting not having brought her knitting. Then she took to studying the aloes in a park rockery, fine specimens that might nicely off-set some of the birds she liked to paint. After a while she

looked up and saw Thomas still talking to that woman, as together they headed for their cars. He got inside, shoved some papers into the glove box and started up the engine. "Nice young thing," he said, as he always did. "Not unlike Elizabeth."

"Oh Thomas, how can you say that," Elma retorted. She'd noticed the glaring red, though dust-coated, varnish on the woman's toe nails.

The blonde sped by, waving jauntily through an open window and three children could be seen doing the same from the back seat, before a plume of dust closed over their silver saloon. It must have run the gauntlet of the elephants before Thomas and Elma even spotted the beasts.

"Wonder what the girls are doing now?" Elma had a sad, vulnerable look on her face.

"Trying to keep warm," he suggested.

"The jerseys should have arrived by now. The last parcels took two weeks to get to the UK."

"Springbok. To your left."

"Perhaps there'll be a letter from Barbara when we get home."

The elephants formed a grey moving bridge across the road, the swaggering bulk of each absurdly out of proportion to their beady eyes and rope-like tails. The only sign that they had seen the car parked a hundred yards away was a turn of a torso and a brief fanning of ears. Several calves knocked clumsily around the padded legs of the adults.

Elma was agitated and the thought that he had driven up too close wasn't lost on Thomas either, but he left the expression of anxiety to her. Perversely, he did

nothing to calm her. He had no intention of reversing the car. The tension between worry and risk had long been a part of their marriage and neither of them would have been able to remember how it grew. It had been at its most obvious when the children were small - scrambling up rocks, learning to ride bicycles, walking alone.

Thomas was taking out his camera, and, before Elma realized what was happening, had opened his door and, with one foot on the ground, was focusing his lens on a belligerent-looking cow elephant. The animal had turned around to face him, chewing, her trunk swinging, calf to heel... Elma gripped her seat - her years of experience of moments like this made her curb her tongue, temporarily. It seemed an age before the shutter clicked, and her husband was beside her again.

Belatedly, the cow took a few threatening steps towards them, paused, and then chose to turn her back on them.

“Should be a good shot,” said Thomas, deliberately nonchalant.

“It had better be,” thought Elma, composing herself, clinging to a recently renewed faith in God.

The herd gradually ate its way over to one side of the road and, from the queue behind Thomas and Elma, a driver was spurred to overtake with an aggressive revving of his engine. Others followed. Of one accord, Thomas and Elma decided to proceed at their own pace. They weren't in a hurry - never had been.

The earth was baking hot, prickling with dry grass and thorn trees. Giraffe waded by, as though the air were a hot sea and they, afloat on waves of shadow and

light. Monkeys blinked and looked wizened, scratching up a powdering of dust from their fur while baboon loitered, displaying shocking-coloured bottoms.

Thomas and Elma moved slowly through air thick with watery mirages, heading for the river and lunch.

“If you want to stop sooner, let me know,” he said. She was searching in the basket for lemon drops.

“See what’s around the next corner.” Elma bobbed up. She had found the lemon drops.

“Are you watching the road, Thomas?” He had veered off the side of the long road, all but pitching into the veldt. “Or, are you on the trail of your thoughts?”

Elma couldn’t understand him living inside himself so much, couldn’t tolerate secrets unless they were her own, and those seldom lasted. Yet, she conceded that there must be something useful going on in his head for he came up with surprisingly astute remarks sometimes. Although he wasn’t always realistic about things like money, his decisions were quite often lucky. They’d lived off the smell of an oil rag but they’d done all right, she would confide in her bosom buddies, in the next breath admitting that it was she who was largely responsible for keeping them afloat. Elma didn’t exactly boast, but she wasn’t going to be falsely modest.

Around the corner was another straight stretch of miles before they would reach the river with its swampy banks. In an unscheduled stop, Thomas drew off the side of the road and parked in some meagre shade. Some buck looked across at them in fear, and then sprang away into the bush.

“Think I’ll stretch my legs.” Thomas was getting out but Elma grabbed his arm, protesting. He grew stiff. “What are you afraid of? Lions? Snakes?” With visions of these jostling for a place, she couldn’t reply immediately.

Eventually, she said, “I have a great deal of imagination, Thomas.” Her hand was now loose on his arm. “If you get out of the car you’ll disturb the birds. I’m hoping to see some hoopoe.”

“As you say, you have a fine imagination,” he said coldly, as he got out of the car. Now, independent.

They both knew she would recapture him, in time.

Thomas carefully scoured the overhanging branches for snakes and, that done, he took the tea and sandwiches she passed through the window and had his picnic standing up with the car bonnet as table. Elma prayed at intervals, while they both watched the passing parade of animals, and when they had finished, the conflict had subsided, although Elma was heading for indigestion. Gathering up their litter, they moved on, towards the river. For reasons unknown to them, this new spot turned out to be favoured by the animals. It was shadier, the trees affording more protection - perhaps that explained it? They saw a family of hippos, wallowing pop-eyed in the water, when another car disturbed their peace by parking unnecessarily close to them, considering the vast amount of space. Their car radio was blaring as the driver got out, followed by a child. The herd of zebra on the far bank scattered, and then reassembled.

“Name’s Olsen and this is my son, Freddie.”

The man stuck a paw through the window to shake hands. Thomas responded cheerfully. Elma was a little more aloof.

“You see the king of beasts back there?” The man was friendly.

“You mean a lion.” Elma’s manner was spontaneously haughty.

“S’right.” The man stuck his face in closer. “Had a bleeding leg and it was in a helluva ugly mood, I can tell you. The wife and kids were wetting themselves. I didn’t feel so happy myself.”

“Possibly came to blows with another lion,” suggested Thomas.

“How do you know dear?”

“It was back that way,” Olsen continued and it dawned on them that he was pointing in the direction of their picnic spot.

“Anyway, must get back to the family. Cheers. Come on, boy.”

So there had been a lion on the prowl, right beside them while they were eating, and Elma’s fears did have some grounds. To her credit, she didn’t rub this in and if Thomas was abashed, he didn’t show it.

They soon began the drive home, the way they’d come. Now their mood was changed, for they were thinking of soaking in baths and chatting with the Mallones; looking forward to drinks on the patio. Their interest in the game was less intense, although, as the day cooled, more animals were on the move. Very near the exit gate, they were forced to slow down by a smallish creature sitting in the middle of the road. It was a female monkey with a baby on its back. To Thomas, this was worth a photograph. A few snaps and they were ready to move on. However, mother monkey showed no sign of stirring until Thomas tried to ease the car around to one side of her. Then she changed her position, but not, as Thomas expected allowing them to pass. Instead, they came closer to a confrontation. With less room to manoeuvre, he pulled on the steering wheel

intending to nose the car around the other side of her but she blocked his path again. The monkeys were now inches from the car bumper. Thomas and Elma could see only the mother's back and the baby's face, like a miniature mask looking wide-eyed at them. Then, before Thomas could react, mother monkey leaped over the bonnet, the baby clinging like a limpet. She was down and up again, snarling and snapping through the car windows with foul-smelling mouth and bared, yellowing teeth, spraying saliva into Elma's face, missing it by a fraction of an inch, the teeth gnashing together viciously. The monkey dropped to the ground again. Thomas put his foot down on the accelerator and they heard the monkey thud against the side of the car in her second furious attack.

Elma was too shocked even to close her window. She sat palely staring, podgy hands dropped in her lap. They sped to the gates and finally Thomas stopped.

"You all right, dear?" he asked gently.

"Yes, I'm all right." Elma nodded, but her eyes were watering.

"You know old thing," he said. "I love you."

After all those years.

They drank the dregs of the tea and got back on the road. A while later Elma started a monologue, which was to last the rest of the journey. "I wonder how Barbara is. Perhaps there'll be a letter from her when we get home. Who would have thought we'd end up living so far away from the grandchildren. Wonder if the baby will arrive early this time? Do you think it'll be a boy or a girl? If she's

had a scan, she'll know. I hope Elizabeth is all right...in her last letter she sounded a bit miserable...they must miss us too..."