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You Make Yourself Human

By Royden Cooke

**Runner-Up, Thompson Rivers
University Creative Non-fiction
Competition**

I was twelve, and the heat beat down on my tender pale skin every day without relief. It seemed like the days grew longer the further we made it down the poorly maintained asphalt pathways. This is where I found myself.

Standing in front of a massive group of strangers on the boiling asphalt, awkward as ever, my parents began to greet and introduce me to their friends. I could only make out two or three familiar faces that I must have known from my childhood, from overseas or something. My parents introduced me to two other families. One large family was composed of parents, a son, and two younger daughters (who were much older than me). The second family, which was much smaller, comprised two parents and a daughter who was still in secondary school. I have to admit that I hated this meeting; it was as mundane as the plain shirt I was wearing. My family, on the other hand, was the largest of the company, made up of the most magnificent twelve-year-old boy that has ever lived, his ten-year-old brother, two elder sisters, nineteen and twenty, and of course, my Mum and Dad. We aren't a regular family by far, but I can say we are a happy family. Although we didn't have more than necessities, we made it through whatever we did, and that was fine with me, except for the Tata, which I really think that was a poor compromise.

The group was composed of three vehicles. One decked-out Toyota bakkie (pronounced "bukky", an afrikaans word for pick-up truck), another embellished Toyota SUV, and finally, out of all the cars

on the continent, my uncle's little five-seater Tata, which had to have exceeded the legal road restrictions. It had the five regular seats most cars had, but it had a secret seat in the back that could be folded down for an extra spot, how smart! But there was a catch, no seatbelt. The loser-cruiser was on its last breath for most of the journey, but it kept on heaving along. As the second youngest, I switched between being stuffed in between my two older sisters, and being in the back, but struggling to get comfortable was the least of my worries. See, I was born and raised in South Africa up until the ripe age of four when I moved into a quiet neighbourhood in Canada, in an average city, where the households could sleep without worrying about whether they had locked the door.

* * *

The concrete jungle with the sweet exception of barren wastelands, started to become less common, and out of the city was a pleasant sight, for the rural areas of Africa are definitely spectacular. I would see a couple of little settlements composed of a dozen or so little shacks, but then some beautiful trees that I had never seen before appeared on our quest, some lacking abundance of life, but some so majestic. The scenery started to fade as I drifted to a pleasing desk, playing video games and drinking a nice cup of hot coco.

"We're here!" The sound of the voice provoked me out of my slumber, and I whimpered myself awake. We parked the car and made our way into a border-crossing building, waiting for the line inside to subside. Then there was a problem. My eldest sister Sarah was denied entry into Botswana. All my Mum told me was that her temporary South African passport wasn't good enough, so what then happened was slightly annoying. The rest of the company, including my father and youngest sister, Becca, carried on into the new country, while me, myself and I, (including my brother, eldest sister and Mum), had to drive back to where we first started, and sort this problem out. My Dad said that they "just had to sort it out with the government, and we'll get back tomorrow. Ugh, this meant another two excruciating journeys in the Tata. But hey, I finally had some leg room!

While driving back, I noticed a row of massive trees, escorting a driveway to a nice little house next to the highway. I remembered these trees, from a painting that hangs in my living room back home. The upside down tree," as my parents described it to me, looks like the whole tree has been shaken up, and replanted with the roots on top. A very weird concept, but either way, an exotic sight.

Later, when the passport dilemma was resolved, we crossed into Botswana, and the roads were atrocious! Bump after bump, scrape after scrape, the car screamed as if it would concede its surrender. That road was a disintegrating mess.

Eventually, my family regrouped with the company in a small town called Selebi Pihve and our three vehicles departed after the meeting and started to drive. The asphalt turned to dust, and only dust. Until then I found out we were going to a small dam where we could camp without disturbing anyone. Don't get me started about that road! When it comes to roads, this wasn't one. We got to the site, where the water was low, so we could drive and park near the water, on the rugged beach. The darn lake was only about the size of a soccer field, and I was advised when we set up our tent, not to go close to the water. Why couldn't I lead myself astray and view the water? Crocs, and not the American gators, I mean the massive twelve-foot-long African monstrosities. My terror started here, the beginning of my nightmare.

We then made our way north, through a city called Francistown, then to a floored void, which my parents explained to me was the salt pans, a little ways away parallel to the road. We passed a couple of checkpoints, which checked for meat. I somewhat understood the meaning of these stops, because of diseases that spread from sector to sector through foods and meat. We made it to a fence, where a man who looked to live in a mud hut, stopped us to talk. My father and the rest of the men then soon concluded the conversation, lined up in front of what looked like the edge of the small island, and started across the vacant void.

The island we made our way to was breathtaking. What beauty had been created was not from abundance of vegetation, but rather from lack of it. The rolling hills of tall, golden grass waved as we passed. The huge baobab trees here were much more dominant than the others I had seen previously. These were humongous trees that stood over twenty to thirty meters tall and the base to the trunk easily reached over five to seven meters in diameter.

The pans seemed as if they had fallen off the edge of the earth, like they keep on going as far as the eye could see, and then just stopped. Such peace and tranquility swept over me when I sat and contemplated why I was there. The ground flaked as I gave my weight to the earth. The heat, the nothingness, 'twas like a scene from those old western movies.

The Okavango river, which turned out to be one of my favourite spots on the trip so far, was infested with bipedal creatures. While eating lunch, gathered around in a circle, talking and socializing, these miniature gorillas invaded our food table just outside of our perimeter. My mother screamed at these opportunists, but they were determined not to give up until nothing remained. My brother and I eventually created a small trap, composed of a large plastic box, a sturdy stick, and fifteen feet of thin rope. We were the monkey hunters, waiting patiently for our prey. A little later, with the investments of a banana and some cookies, the nuts slowly came towards the bait. One potential victim neared our

contraption, closer and closer, reminding me of when I'm making sure there are no witnesses before I take a sweet from a tray. It reaches in and feels the banana, and wham it was gone with our sacrifices. A bloody, cheeky creature I have to say, deciphering our trap, or it was just our stupidity favouring the rascals?

On one of the afternoons, our group booked a guided boat tour on the river. What an idea. All thirteen of us, stuffed in an aluminum framed raft, on a river infested with not only the most notably deadly animal in Africa, but crocs, snakes and elephants! You might ask why I was concerned with elephants? Well, Dumbo isn't the friendliest creature when you surprise him with a visit. While propelling upstream, we ran across some of the most amazing creatures, which included some magnificent small birds that my father called kingfishers, some rather insignificant crocodiles, and an otter! This was a whole revelation in itself to me. I then got a lesson about the spotted-necked otter, that really only lived in the Okavango climate. How did an animal that I thought only lived in the Northern Hemisphere, and really only in North America, end up in the depths of Africa? It was truly an amazing experience. However, that was not the end. We made it up the river for a further twenty minutes, and ran into a herd of hippopotamuses. Holy smokes, that was downright one of the scariest moments in my life, right after another hippo scare, on which I will elaborate later. Hippos, lots of hippos. We would have turned back, right? Nah, we kept on going, like a couple territorial hippos weren't going to spoil our tour. Well, one

hungry hippo wasn't going to have it. Sitting in the raft I noticed a ripple in the water about twenty meters behind our boat. Panicking, I declared the situation severe. I accepted my fate with an expression of doom. We were done, the latest victims of hippo brutality. Thank the lord our guide reacted heroically, and sped up just before the titanic surfaced.

The Okavango showed me that Africa also had the wonders the South American continent has, but with this comes the inevitable harshness of the barren, dusty landscape that borders this beauty.

Compared to Botswana, Namibia was much more charming. Colours flowed from the dust from a parched landscape, to vibrant green leaves in the swamps. We made our way to a the Eastern tip of Namibia, which my parents described to me as the tip of Namibia, because on the map, this section of the country had a long narrow shape, then a triangular part ending its extension Well, here was where constant fright came into play.

We got to a part on the blood-red road, where there was a stream, more like a river perhaps, but water was stopping us in our tracks. There were two options, the first being a log bridge that looked like it was being held together by rope, and the second being a drive through the two-meter-high water. Hah! I walked. My mother and I left the group and ambled across the precarious so-called bridge. Then the other two vehicles sped through the flowing water. It was an exciting moment to see the trucks purge their way through! Looking as if they would drown, but then would buck themselves another couple meters. After this

crossing, we made it further into the swamps they called a national park, witnessing definite beauty, such as towering elephants, which as always, were hesitant to crumple us in our tin cans.

We crossed multiple boggy areas, infested with residents ready for a snack, when one crossing claimed my family as refugees. Concerned with the looks of the tracks, one vehicle went first, and made it across, then, as planned, it was our turn. Cranking it, my father guided us rapidly through, but suddenly, with the engine revving without a reaction, we were stuck! My father tried to salvage the Tata while the rest of us fled the marsh. It took a tow-line and the advanced bakkie to pull it out. The problem was, I, along with the rest of my family, was on the starting side. Luckily for me, my ride was the roof of the SUV. As bumpy as it was, it was much more pleasant than the walk.

The campsite was on a point of a lake, which contained hippos, that made me extraneously nervous. Although thoughts of being snatched from my tent in the pitch black caused tremors in my mind, the variety of joy and fright was phenomenal, especially one night, when we were all sitting around the fire conversing. My father and his friend were admiring a grazing hippo at the edge of the campsite until my Dad coughed, and I have never seen such a chunky animal move that fast. I froze, while the rest of the party ran for their dear lives. At the corners of my eye, I saw a mother being shoved into a car by her daughter, my own mother and siblings running in opposite directions, and of course, what I saw, was my life flash right before my eyes. The beast made right for us, then out of

the grace of God, swerved parallel to the shore, splashing into darkness. What I experienced defines my very definition of fear. I was alive, and the troop joked for the rest of the night.

Going on this trip showed me what I was, a twelve-year-old boy who had privilege, selfishness, narcissistic attitudes, and, worst of all, disrespect. Travelling through South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, and seeing the beauty and majestic landscape, with the predators in the forefront, made me aware of how little I was. All the egotistical childishness I swathed myself in was useless in this environment. Take off the clothes that wrap us, the commodities we possess, and we are only fragile prey; but by noticing the limits of being human. I concluded with this: that I make myself who I am; and how I act, think, talk and live defines my nature, good or bad.