



SWIMMING IN AIR

FINDING A PATH FROM CAIRO TO CAPE

PARKER GRIFFON

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The events in this book happened. To protect their privacy, nearly everyone's names and details associated with them have been changed. The narrative is as accurate as memory allows. I am confident that if this story were told by someone there at the time, it might be different in detail, but not in substance.

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One day two young fish are swimming along when they meet an older fish going the other way. “Morning, boys,” he says. “How’s the water?” The two young fish swim on for a while when one turns to the other and asks, “What’s water?” — David Foster Wallace

“Every love story is a tragedy if you wait long enough.” — *Handmaid’s Tale*.

Prologue

March 29, 1988

It was a year and a half before the Berlin Wall fell, two years before the end of apartheid and six years before the Rwandan genocide. All were a surprise to nearly everyone, myself included, even though I'd spent a fair amount of time in each place. It's a statement of the human condition, I suppose, that we struggle to pay attention to what's going on around us; easier to live one day as a small variation of the last, until it isn't. Then we mourn the passing of what was, complain about the injustice of it all, and hope for a world we can once again take for granted.

Probably the best dressed hobo in the UK, I hurried down Kensington High Street that early London morning troubled both by the clothes I wore and the expectations that came with them. The conservative new business suit that would eventually serve me through two weddings and a funeral was itchy and damp from intermittent rain. The tie I'd struggled to remember how to knot that morning was chafing my neck. Shiny wingtips that hadn't seen feet before that day were rubbing a blister on my heel. But the clothes were at least doing their job. I passed for just another someone trying not to be late to the office; so long as you didn't look at my face, deeply tanned but for the red and irritated part where an unkempt beard grew until I

shaved it off that morning. No clothes could fix that. Fortunately, commuters don't make eye contact.

Promptly at nine, I arrived at the offices of Lurnix Labs, a British tech startup. Months since I'd seen the insides of an office, the institutional beige and off-white walls lighted by humming fluorescent lights and the odd poster describing UNIX as the future of computing made me want to turn and leave. I instead informed the receptionist that I was there to meet with Allan, the managing director. The woman stared at me as though I was an alien. I wondered if it was my two-toned face, but then I remembered the no-first-names rule of British business. "Parker Griffon to meet with Allan Bailey." Since I now fit into a known category, she picked up the phone, untangled the handset cord and quietly said something into it. Motioning me toward the waiting area, she set the phone down and the cord immediately reverted to a tangled ball.

I took a seat and was mindlessly listening to the *whir-tak-tak-tak* of dot matrix printers and metallic hunt and peck of coders in front of oversized CRT displays, when a proper middle-aged woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Lawrence arrived to shepherd me through the building. A momentary shadow crossing her face reminded me of someone arriving for a blind date to find a suitor not at all what they'd expected.

After leading me to a nondescript conference room, she asked, "Coffee or tea?"

"Coffee, thank you."

“Mr. Bailey says you’ve been traveling rough through Africa for some months with your ... uh,” she paused pouring the coffee.

“My fiancé,” I lied. It was just a white lie, I told myself. I didn’t have a fiancé. I wasn’t even sure I still had a girlfriend. The truth didn’t lend itself to a quick summary and was frankly nobody’s business. The expression on Mrs. Lawrence’s face told me she thought otherwise, so I dug a recent picture out of my wallet and swapped it for the coffee.

“How lovely,” she gushed. She looked up as if trying to imagine a match between the man she saw before her with the woman in the picture. “You’re a lucky man.” No idea if she was right or wrong, I smiled and politely agreed. She handed the photo back and I inspected it briefly before returning it to my wallet. “Is she seeing the sights today or resting after the trip?”

“She’s still in Africa.”

“Oh, were you traveling with a group?”

I struggled to find a way to avoid the question but drew a blank. “No, she’s alone,” I replied. At least I hoped she was alone. “When I left, she was headed off into the bush. I suppose she’s somewhere around Monkey Bay by now.”

Mrs. Lawrence’s British reserve couldn’t hide the judgement I read on her face. Fortunately, the thought of my lovely fiancé hacking her way through the jungle alone with a machete, watched by curious chimps squatting unseen in the canopy above, stumped her long enough for

Mr. Bailey to show up. "Thank you, Lawrence," he said, a polite way of dismissing her.

As Mrs. Lawrence closed the door behind her, we shook hands and switched to first names, a mid-Atlantic nod to my unfortunate Americanness. "Good to see you, Parker," he said. My two-toned face didn't seem to dampen his enthusiasm. "It looks like that stop in Johannesburg gave you enough time to buy a suit." I nodded. It had also cost me more than two months of living out of a backpack. "That telex you sent from Africa surprised me," he continued. Telexes were mechanical typewriters that spit out all of 66 characters per second, the least expensive and, in some cases, the only way to quickly get a long-distance message to someone. "It's been, what, seven months? Weren't you two going round the world?"

"Things change," I replied. "You meet someone who tells you about a place just over the hill, so you flag down a truck and go there. Then there's another person, another hill and another truck. Before you know it, you're a couple of thousand miles down the road and time's gone by."

"And how are things with your girlfriend?" Allan asked. "Finally ready to move to the States for us?"

"Absolutely," I lied. Allan went quiet expecting more but I concentrated on stirring my coffee. After an uncomfortable silence, he said, "Well, why don't we get started."

The morning passed quickly. As we were finishing our working lunch, Mrs. Lawrence discretely knocked on the conference room door. "Pardon me for the interruption,"

she said and handed me a telex. “This arrived earlier today, Mr. Griffon. It’s from your fiancé and appears to be urgent. I would have brought it earlier, but the mail room only distributes telexes twice daily.”

“Fiancé!” Allen exclaimed, smiling. I’d suddenly gone up in his estimation. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sorry, it slipped my mind,” I said, amazed at how quickly lies grow legs. I took the telex and quickly scanned it.

FM: VIVIAN FALKENBERG, MAIN POST OFFICE, LILONGWE, MALAWI
TO: PARKER GRIFFON C/O ALLAN BAILEY, EDUNIX, LONDON
HAVE MALARIA. 60USD LEFT. TRANSFER DIDN'T ARRIVE.
MAY NEED YOUR HELP. WILL TELEX NUMBER FOR CALL TOMORROW.
V

“Ah, Vivian,” I sighed. The telex looked purposefully short to save money. The main ideas were there but key details were missing. Having malaria could mean anything from feeling really bad to needing to be evacuated. I did a quick mental calculation and figured that the \$60 would last three days until Friday if she were at a hostel and a week to next Tuesday if she were in the tent. I tried to imagine her alone in the tent with malaria and couldn’t. She must be in a hostel. Then I thought about how much health care cost in Malawi and decided she might not have until Friday.

I could only guess where she was in that little African nation eight thousand kilometers away. It was pure luck that she took Lurnix’s telex number in the first place. She insisted she wouldn’t need it. She’d had enough of me during those months traveling together and was going to

use the time alone to think about our relationship, about what would come next, not send me expensive notes. Now it was the only slender thread connecting us. Phones that could make international calls being thin on the ground in that part of the world, until she found one and sent the number with a time to call all I could do was wait.

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Sunday, April 20, 1986

Two years before, I was at Heathrow waiting to change planes. The journey that started the day before from San Francisco to New York then to London had been tedious but the cheapest way to get to Europe short of playing Russian roulette with Aeroflot. When the boarding call for the Lufthansa flight from London to Munich came over the public address system, I joined a shuffling line of fellow travelers headed down the ramp, hoping for anything in English to keep me awake. The only newspaper left on the rack at the plane's door was a *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. I tucked it under my arm figuring I could at least look at the pictures.

Airline deregulation not yet having come to Europe, economy class was comfortable, the plane less than half full and the middle seat empty. On the other side of that empty seat sat a young US Air Force two-striper, just a sandy-haired kid who couldn't have been north of eighteen years old. Having heard me speak American English to the flight attendant, it was clear he wanted to get his words out since we left London. Not feeling up to small talk, I pretended to read the *Allgemeine*, but as we began our descent to landing, he finally made eye contact. With a slow drawl that hinted he was from the Carolinas, he said, "Looks like we're almost there. Name's Tanner."

"Parker," I replied. "Nice to meet you." We awkwardly shook hands side by side.

"First time outside the States," he said. "I don't understand most of all that's going on. How about you?"

I thought back to when I was wearing the same uniform, then to my first overseas trip and how confusing everything was. Just a hayseed from downstate Illinois. People helped me then. It was the least I could do but to pay it forward. Besides, it would help me stay awake. "This is my fourth trip to Munich," I replied. "Business."

"What business are you in?" he asked.

"Computer software. I'm moving to Munich to set up European operations for a Silicon Valley startup. We're new and small but I think we'll grow fast."

The look on his face told me none of it meant anything to him so I asked where he would be stationed. “Near some place called Garmisch at first,” he replied, “but I’ll likely end up at Ramstein near Frankfurt. Can’t say I know much about either place. Do you?”

“Ramstein is a typical large Air Force base. Baseball, bowling, the PX sells food from home. It would be easy to stay on base and never see Germany. I’d make the effort to get out if I were you. Especially Garmisch. It’s maybe the most beautiful part of Germany.”

“Wow, that’s great,” he said. I wasn’t sure if he was happy to be going to Garmisch or because he could live on base and never hear a word of German. “By the way,” he continued, “rumor is that the beer is good and the Fräuleins sociable.”

“The beer is good, but don’t know about the Fräuleins. I have a girlfriend back in San Francisco.” The image of Gwen popped into my mind, a tall, kind woman with long auburn hair, and with the image came a feeling of sadness. “Or I had a girlfriend. I guess I’m not so sure. The last thing she said before she pushed me into the line for security was that we should feel free to see other people.”

He shook his head. “Sounds like she’s lookin’ to test drive a new model boyfriend. My girl dropped me when I got my overseas orders.” A wistful look came to his face. “Gettin’ dumped sucks.”

“It does suck,” I replied, “but I don’t really blame mine. I won’t be back in the States for a couple of years and with the cost of transatlantic phone calls, we’d be sharing our lives by letter. We never figured things out anyway. Not really. Or maybe I didn’t. I’m a bit of a nomad.”

“Not me,” said the airman with a hopeful smile. “When I get out, I’m gettin’ me a job in a textile mill back home, marry a Lowlands girl who can cook and have a dozen kids.”

I felt a surprising pang of envy at the thought of his Thanksgivings surrounded by a large, loving family. Then I imagined him in twenty years with cotton lung from working in the mill, his nights at home fighting with a nagging wife and ungrateful kids. Neither made me think better of myself, so I smiled and said, “God bless. I hope you get an even fourteen.”

Breaking out of the clouds, the runway appeared and the plane landed hard. “Navy pilot,” snorted the airman. Grabbing my bags from the overhead bin, I wished Tanner a good tour of duty.

The immigration line was full of tired, cranky people, me included. We moved along nicely at first and then seemed to stop. Peeking over a few heads, I saw a smiling official talking to a woman, all I could make out was her reddish blonde hair. Both were oblivious as the line backed up.

Months later, Vivian looked at our passports and announced that we arrived at the Munich-Riem airport the same afternoon. Kismet, fate, destiny, she said. When I

thought back to that Sunday, it wasn't exactly how I remembered it.

After nineteen hours in transit through Rio and Rome, Vivian walked up to a particularly chatty officer who took her German passport and compared her to the document: Height: 170 cm. Hair: *Rotblonde*. Eyes: *Blau*. Age: 25.

Leafing through the pages of the passport, he asked, "Born in Argentina?" The question had no official purpose. As a German citizen, it would have been the same if she'd been born on Mars. However, chatting up this attractive young woman was a pleasant way to break the afternoon routine.

"Yes, Buenos Aires," she replied. "I'm German-Argentine."

"Business or pleasure?" If she were coming to Germany for a séance, the answer would have made no difference.

"Business. My first time living in Germany."

"You didn't grow up here?" he said with a look of surprise. "Your German is perfect."

Vivian could start a conversation with a rock and the two were soon talking about the German colony in Argentina. A man in line coughed loudly to get their attention. Vivian later said that was probably me being rude. A woman near the front of the line wondered aloud what the holdup was. The officer reluctantly handed her passport back and Vivian left to find her luggage.

When I finally made my way to the front of the immigration line, I handed over my blue American

passport to a very bored bureaucrat who looked down, then up, as he compared me to my documents. Height: 6'1". Hair: Brown. Eyes: Green. Age: 31.

I was just another *Ami* passing through. Nothing worth spending time on. "Business or pleasure?" he asked.

"Business."

He frowned. That made things more difficult and the line was already backed up. "How long do you intend to stay in Germany?"

"Two years," I replied.

He leafed through my passport. "I see no work or residence permit."

"I am *Geschäftsführer* of ExaSoft GmbH in Munich." Pulling out the incorporation papers from a few months before, I pointed to my name listed as the managing director. "A residence and work permit are automatic so long as I hold that position."

The officer consulted a co-worker, nodded and stamped my passport. "*Alle'st in Ordnung. Willkommen in Deutschland.*"

In baggage claim, I caught a glimpse across the hall of the woman with the reddish-blond hair. She was struggling with a pile of luggage. I thought about offering to help but remembering how she held up everyone in the passport line, I decided to let her deal with it herself. It wasn't long before someone else offered.



Mountain Gorillas, Karisimbi Volcano, Zaire, 1988



Rwenzori Foothills, Ibanda, Uganda, 1988