

SWIMMING IN AIR

Parker Griffon

CORRIENTES  PUBLISHING

Swimming in Air

Copyright © 2025 by Parker Griffon.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

The events in this book happened. To protect their privacy, nearly everyone's name and associated details 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.

ISBN: 979-8-9998392-0-6

For more information, contact: parker@parkergriffon.com

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

“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.”

— Frederick Buechner

PROLOGUE

She achieved everything she set out to do, except live to thirty. Brilliant and beautiful, Argentine by birth, German by ancestry, a global traveler by accident and choice, she charmed the world in five languages until she got what she wanted, whether it was friends, a job, or me.

Born Viviana on a mid-winter July day in Buenos Aires, she ultimately rejected the *Registro Civil-Nombres* rule that female names end in -a, instead becoming Vivian, the seemingly confident, strong woman who made friends with everyone she met. However, if you had patience, you would discover that Viviana was still there, hidden, vulnerable, and with the passionate soul of a South American woman.

1

MARCH 1988

Early morning light filtered through the gaps in the curtains, turning everything it touched a dull gray. Instinctively reaching to the other side of the bed, I half expected to feel Vivian's warm softness, but my hand met only the cool, empty sheets. Still groggy from the eleven-hour flight from Johannesburg to London, I checked the clock on the side table and was relieved to see that I didn't need to get up just yet. Lying back, I examined the aging ornate Edwardian ceiling of my hotel room and thought about how we live each day as a small variation of the last, until it isn't.

Three weeks before, Vivian and I were in French-speaking Zaire, having yet another dinner of unknown meat and bland rice while sitting outside our tent, swatting mosquitoes. After struggling to keep from being eaten alive while not spilling our food, she set her plate down, looked at me, and exploded. "I'm tired of nothing working, of everyone staring at me. I'm tired of hand-washing my clothes every day, of looking like a rag lady. I'm tired of constantly translating for you."

I wasn't surprised by her outburst; rather, that after six months of living out of a backpack, it hadn't happened earlier. She had been doing almost everything for us since we left English-speaking East Africa weeks earlier because, as she said, my French was worse than my Swahili, and my Swahili was pitiful.

Hoping she was finished, I said nothing. Unfortunately, she wasn't. Looking at me with her beautiful, but now sad, blue eyes, she said quietly, "And I'm tired of you."

I let the words hang in the air, hoping they'd somehow evaporate. But they didn't.

The alarm clock jolted me out of my half-sleep. I skipped breakfast because it took longer than expected to reacquaint myself with the razor, and I hurried onto the busy Kensington High Street. The conservative new business suit, which would eventually see me through two weddings and a funeral, soon became itchy and damp from intermittent rain, but it helped me pass as just another person trying not to be late for work—so long as they didn't look at my face. It was deeply tanned, except for the red, irritated patch where an unkempt beard had grown until I shaved it off that morning. Luckily, commuters don't make eye contact.

Promptly at nine, I arrived at the office of Lurnix Labs, a British tech startup. Telling the receptionist that I was there to meet with Allan, she stared at me, seemingly puzzled. I wondered if it was my two-toned face or my American accent, but then I remembered the no-first-names rule of British business. "Parker Griffon to meet with Allan Bailey." That seemed to do it. She picked up the phone, untangled the handset cord, and quietly spoke into it.

Motioning me toward a row of chairs, she set the phone down. I took a seat and was mindlessly listening to the whir-tak-tak-tak of dot matrix printers when a middle-aged woman, dressed conservatively in a tailored blazer and matching skirt, appeared before me.

"Good morning, Mr. Griffon," she said. "Evelyn Lawrence, Mr. Bailey's secretary." We shook hands, and she led me through the building.

When we arrived at a conference room, she gestured toward a seat. Turning to the beverage station on a credenza, 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. The look on Ms. Lawrence's face told me she wanted more, so I pulled out a picture from my wallet and traded it for the coffee.

“How lovely,” she gushed, and looked up as if trying to match what she saw before her with the woman in the picture. “You’re a lucky man.” She handed the photo back, and I briefly inspected it before returning it to my wallet.

“I hope there were no problems with the flights we arranged.” I nodded. “And is the hotel comfortable?”

“Yes, thank you. Hot water and a soft bed. I was in heaven.”

“Was your fiancé able to get seats on the same flights?”

I couldn’t think of a way to avoid answering the question. “She’s still in Africa.”

“Oh. In Johannesburg?”

“No, she’s alone in Malawi,” I replied. “When I left, she was headed into the bush. I suppose she’s somewhere around Monkey Bay by now.”

Even the proper Ms. Lawrence couldn’t conceal her disapproval. Fortunately, the thought of my lovely fiancé hacking her way through the jungle with a machete, watched by curious chimps squatting unseen in the canopy above, stumped her long enough for Mr. Bailey to arrive.

“Thank you, Evelyn,” he said, a polite way of dismissing her.

The last time I saw Allan Bailey, my small software operation in Munich was being dismantled by a British private equity firm. Since my German residence permit disappeared with the company, I was packing the last of my belongings when Allan unexpectedly called. He said he didn’t have a presence outside the UK and asked if I’d be interested in setting up Lurnix’s US operations. It was a great opportunity, but I thanked him and said I wasn’t interested. I was burned out from too much time on the tech hamster wheel and needed space to think. Then there was Vivian, who had no interest in moving to the US.

Allan persisted, showing remarkable flexibility. Go do what you have to do for six months, he said, then come back. Believing I would have everything figured out by then, I agreed. I was wrong.

As Ms. Lawrence closed the door behind her, Allan and I shook hands and switched to first names, a mid-Atlantic nod to my unfortunate Americanness. “Good to see you, Parker,” he said. “It looks like the stop in Johannesburg gave you enough time to buy a suit.”

I nodded. It also cost more than two months of living out of a backpack.

“That telex you sent surprised me.” Telexes were mechanical typewriters that spit out all of 66 characters per second, the least expensive and, in some cases, the only way to send a long-distance message quickly. “It’s been, what, seven months? How did you get stuck in Africa? Weren’t you two going round the world?”

“Things change. 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.”

“In any case, it’s great to have you back. Are you ready to rejoin the corporate world?”

“One hundred percent. I’m looking forward to a new challenge, not to mention regular hot showers.”

Allan smiled. “And how are things with your girlfriend? Will she be moving to the States with you?”

“Absolutely.”

Allan fell silent, waiting for more, but I focused on stirring my coffee. After an awkward pause, he said, “Well, why don’t we get started?”

We made good progress throughout the morning on revenue forecasts, headcount, and total investment. As we finished our working lunch, Ms. Lawrence quietly knocked on the conference room door. “Pardon me for the

interruption,” she said and handed me a telex. “This just arrived, Mr. Griffon. It’s from your fiancé and appears to be urgent.”

“Fiancé!” Allan exclaimed, smiling. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

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

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

“Oh, shit,” I mumbled softly.

The telex appeared intentionally brief to save money. The main ideas were there, but key details were missing. Taking a deep breath to slow myself down, I carefully parsed the note word for word. Having malaria could range from feeling very sick to needing evacuation. She’d somehow made her way to the main post office, which gave me hope.

After a quick mental calculation, I decided that the \$60 would last three days if she were at a hostel or a week if she were in the tent. But could she be tenting alone with malaria? Then I thought about healthcare costs in Malawi and decided she probably didn’t have even three days.

What worried me most was that if she wrote that she might need help, it almost certainly meant she did. It was pure luck that she took Lurnix’s telex number. She had no plans to send me expensive notes. Now the telex was the only slender thread connecting us. Phones capable of international calls were scarce in that part of the world, so until she found one and sent the number and a time to call, all I could do was wait.