

SWIMMING IN AIR

Parker Griffon

CORRIENTES  PUBLICATIONS

Swimming in Air

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This is a work of memoir. I have stayed as close to the truth as forty years of distance allows, and any errors of fact are my own, born from the passage of time. I am confident that if this story were told by someone who was there at the time, it might differ in detail, but not in substance.

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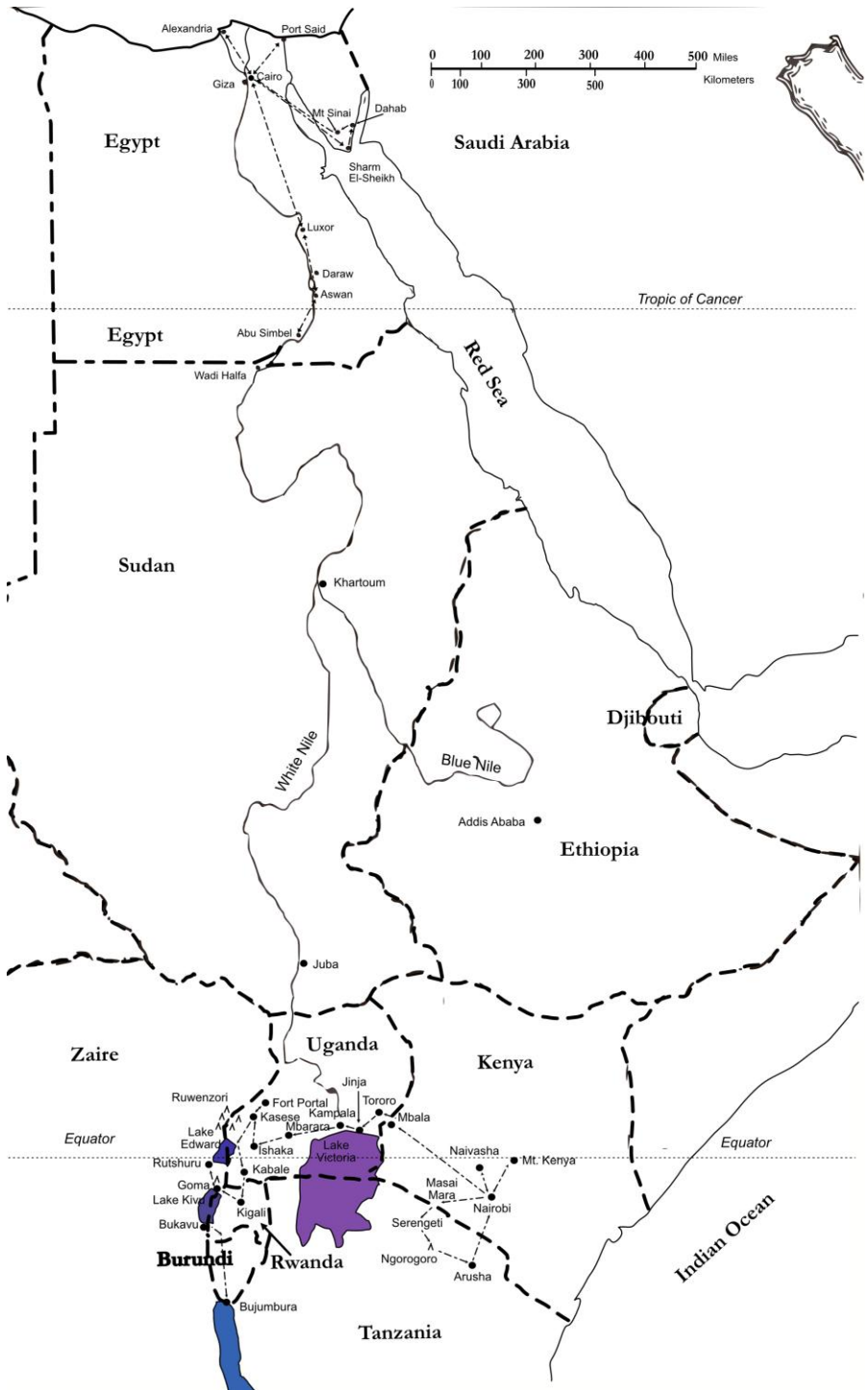
For more information, contact: info@parkergriffon.com

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

AFRICA 1988







Zaire

Tanzania

Angola

Zambia

MALAWI

Lusaka

Cape Maclear

Caprivi Strip

Victoria Falls

Zimbabwe

MOZAMBIQUE

Namibia

Botswana

Tropic of Capricorn

Etosha Pan

Windhoek

Natal

Lüderitz

Keetmanshoop

Seeheim

Grünau

Orange Free State

Johannesburg

Middelburg

Mbamba

Swaziland

Springbok

Northern Cape

Lesotho

South Africa

KwaZulu

St. Lucia

Western Cape

Eastern Cape

Cape Town

Oudtshoorn

Plettenburg Bay

Port Elizabeth

Knysna

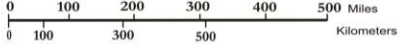
Umata

Transkel

Bisho

Ciskel

Coffee Bay



PROLOGUE

March 1988. I reached to the other side of the bed for Vivian, but felt only cold, empty sheets. Still groggy after the eleven-hour flight from Johannesburg to London, I settled back, stared at the ornate ceiling of my Edwardian era hotel room, and thought about how we live each day as a slight variation of the last, until it isn't.

Three weeks earlier, Vivian and I were in French-speaking Zaire, sitting outside our tent, eating dinner and swatting mosquitoes. Partway through yet another meal of bland rice and unknown meat, she set down her plate.

In a voice so quiet it made me pay attention, she said, "I'm tired of nothing working. I'm tired of hand-washing my clothes every day. Of looking like a rag lady and constantly translating for you."

At first, I wondered: Why now? We had been living out of backpacks for six months, and this day was no different from the others. But then I thought about what the last few weeks since we left English-speaking East Africa had cost her. Every small task fell to her because, as she said to me at one point in frustration, I couldn't even order escargots in French.

She was right. I had no defense, so I said nothing, hoping she was done. She wasn't.

She looked up at me with her piercing, now-sad blue eyes and said, "And I'm tired of you."

I let her words hang in the air, willing them to evaporate into the evening sky. But they didn't.

The alarm clock going off brought me back to the present, and I began my reentry into the corporate world. A glance out the window revealed a typical wet, gray late-March London morning. After showering and getting reacquainted with a razor, I looked like any other office worker, except for the red, irritated skin where a beard had been until moments earlier.

Running late, I hurried onto the busy Kensington High Street. The tie I'd struggled to remember how to knot that morning began chafing my neck. Shiny brand-new wingtips rubbed a blister on my heel. And I'd forgotten to buy an umbrella, so my new conservative wool business suit was getting damp and itchy.

Right on time, I arrived at the offices of Lurnix Labs, a British tech startup, and told the receptionist I was there to meet with Allan. She stared at me. I

wondered whether it was my two-toned face or my American accent. Then I remembered the no-first-names rule of British business. “Parker Griffon to meet with Allan Bailey.” That seemed to do it. She motioned me toward a row of chairs.

I had barely sat down when a middle-aged woman, dressed in a tailored blazer and matching skirt, appeared.

“Good morning, Mr. Griffon.” She extended her hand. “Evelyn Lawrence, Mr. Bailey’s secretary.”

She led me to a conference room and gestured toward a seat. As she turned to the beverage station on a credenza, she asked, “Tea or coffee?”

“Coffee, thank you.”

She studied me with polite curiosity. “Mr. Bailey says you’ve been traveling rough through Africa for some months with your, uh ...”

“My fiancée,” I lied. Ms. Lawrence’s expression looked like she wanted more, so I pulled a picture from my wallet and traded it for the coffee.

“Well. She’s quite beautiful. And that hair. Is she Scots?”

“No, she’s Argentine.”

Apparently unable to place a strawberry blonde in South America, she handed the photo back and changed the subject. “I hope there were no problems with the flights we arranged.” She waited for my nod. “And is the hotel comfortable?”

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

“Is your fiancée here with you?”

I couldn’t think of a way to avoid the question. “No, she’s still in Africa.”

“In Johannesburg, seeing the sights?”

“She’s in Malawi,” I replied. “When I last saw her, she was heading into the bush. I suppose she’s somewhere around Monkey Bay by now.”

Her eyebrows lifted, just slightly. “Alone?”

“Well, yes.”

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

“Thank you, Evelyn,” he said.

The last time I'd seen 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. "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. The clothes had also cost more than two months of backpacking. "That telex you sent surprised me."

Telexes, mechanical typewriters that could print only 66 characters per second, were the least expensive and sometimes the only way to quickly send a long-distance message from sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1980s.

"It's been, what, seven months? How did you end up staying in Africa? Weren't you two going around 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."

"No matter. It's great to see you. How are things with your girlfriend? Will she be moving to the States with you?"

"Absolutely." Another fib.

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?"

Throughout the morning, we made good progress on revenue forecasts, headcount, and total investment. As we finished our working lunch, Ms.

Lawrence knocked on the conference room door. “Pardon me for the interruption,” she said, handing me a telex. “This just arrived, Mr. Griffon. It’s from your fiancée and appears to be urgent.”

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

“Sorry, it slipped my mind,” I replied, surprised at how quickly a lie grows 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

I fell quiet and tried to understand the message. I felt utterly powerless.

At best, malaria meant days of debilitating chills, fevers, and vomiting. At worst, you came home in a box. It gave me hope that she made it to the main post office—unless, of course, someone else had sent the telex for her.

I took a deep breath and carefully parsed the note. The telex was intentionally brief, probably to save money. After a quick mental calculation, I figured that \$60 would last three days if she was at a hostel or a week if she was in the tent. But could she be tenting alone with malaria? Then I wondered about healthcare costs in Malawi and decided the \$60 might not last even three days.

I had barely convinced her to write Lurnix’s telex number in her little notebook. She wanted time alone, she had said, and that didn’t involve sending me expensive notes.

This was a woman who, before I knew her, had moved across the world to assert her independence from a man. Given how much pride she had to swallow to send that telex, writing that she might need help almost certainly meant she did.

Now the thin scrap of paper I held was the only thread connecting us. Phones capable of international calls were scarce in Malawi. Until she found one and sent the number with a time to call, all I could do was wait.