



'Read it over the week end and live it forever'
WILD is where you'll want to be in discovering your own nature

Wild

Rodney St Clair Ballenden

KINGDOM EARTH

ARRIVE

Roland stands on the roof of the white bakkie, the one he calls Girlie; his only friend. He reaches into the sky, clinging for dear life, daring not to fall.

He scans his new world.

Everything appears to be the same. Yet nothing matches. The sky and the earth are one. Trees grow upside down and the grass a deep blue colour, like the sea, lapping against his feet. He is a shipwrecked sailor standing on a tin saucer his survival at the mercy of the winds and the waves. And the saucer wobbles. He spreads his arms to balance himself, his heart beating. If he falls he will drown.

“Have mercy upon me,” he begs.

He feels his feet slipping and reaches up. But where to hold? There is nothing, like a chasm, only the breeze in his face. He shades his eyes against the glare of the sun and sees the grass bending, all at once, bending in a song. A path opens for him to follow and he jumps, landing on the pads of his feet.

And the leaves of every tree clap their applause.

“I am Standing Feather,” he says introducing himself to the wilderness. “I am light on my feet and come in peace. I want to stay and I surrender my survival to the wisdom of our greater Universe.”

“Wait until dark,” a voice teases him.

“I cannot wait,” Roland replies. “The son of Xanos does not wait.”

He opens his stride going where he will, excited by the wildness surrounding him. A bird cackles. A brittle alarm. He stops. A breeze swirls through the grass and the path closes. He now wades knee deep into the breaking waves, the fire in his blood raging through his veins.

Roland heads for a tree leaning at a crazy angle, the one branch touching the ground.

“Hello!” He yells. “Anyone there?”

No echo returns. The bush swallows his voice, every blade of grass hungry for the sound.

The month of August signals the last month of winter, the light fading fast, and the grass crisp and dry. Roland cannot risk a fire. The night will be long and dark; the moon only half. But the stars will shine, a brilliant pattern, with not a cloud in the sky and no electric lights of any establishment or house or manmade structure to dim their sight.

“I will make my bed here,” and Roland scuffs a bare patch under the tree. “I can lean against the trunk...and stare into the darkness.” He moves around the trunk to a better place. “Nothing can surprise me here...nothing from behind. I am safe.”

He fetches a blanket and a packet of biscuits from the bakkie, and leans against the tree.

“Tomorrow I’ll build a shelter. And a shower...I need to wash,” he says.

The biscuits are dry and difficult to swallow. He wraps the blanket tight around his shoulders wishing he had brought a bottle of water and not been in such a hurry.

“I’ll be fine,” he consoles himself. “This is great.”

He pulls the branch hanging over him lower, like a claw protecting him.

“Hold me. That’s right. Nothing can get me in here.”

His legs itch, his eyes burn, and his nose runs. A trickle of blood runs down his arm where a thorn had scratched him and he picks a twig from the branch and wipes the blood away. A fly bites him on the cheek.

“Welcome to paradise,” they all say.

He hums a song remembering the songs of his mother and how happy he felt when she was singing. And he smiles at the memory of Nick and Oniro and the crusty old sailor, Mikis, who had taught him the vagaries of the open sea.

“Steady as she goes. Hold her boy! And keep the breeze behind you,” he had said.

“Thank you Mikis, I remember,” Roland says.

“There is no enemy...”

“Only yourself.”

“You can do it. Ride this oyster boy.”

“Only me to tame,” and Roland laughs at these memories. ““I have landed,” he says. “God knows where, but here I am. And new songs will come...they will. I know it. I know it now, because I have done this before.”

The inspiration to abandon Camp Serape had come in a mad rush driven by a bottle of red wine courtesy of Peter Lubber.

It was supposed to have been a bottle of milk, but what madness comes in milk? And even now, under the tree in the wilderness of no return, Roland does not regret it. He left in a mad rush and that's how he likes it. *Je ne regret pas*, so sang Edith Piaf. Brad had labelled her only half a woman and Roland didn't argue knowing that when she sang she made him feel more than just a man.

There had been no 'what if' questions to cover all the safety rules. The plan was to face the music and solve each issue as it appeared. After all, why create an issue that may never occur. Don't get stuck. Be brave and walk where you have never walked before. Don't cook, eat raw food. And why sleep under a roof when the stars will cover you? Roland had chosen only the bare essentials and then loaded only half of those. He goes to a place of no civilisation so why take all the old comforts. No tent. No bed. The full naked jacket. Big brave; big strong; full of inspiration.

"That's my boy, Standing Feather," Begay would have praised him.

"No one knows where you are going," Roland reminds himself. "You cannot be found. Take pleasure in that, my boy."

He shakes off the blanket and stands on an ant heap to scan the bush for another place to sleep. A dense thicket will do. He looks back at Girlie and sees her white roof above the grass and her tracks leading in, but none leading out. An owl glides through the eerie light, disappearing into the dry river bed.

"I could crawl into a hole," he thinks and huddles back under the tree.

The only comfort he feels is in the good fortune of having arrived in one piece. Whole. Sound of body and mind. He could have been run over by a train in Milano. He could have died in the mountains with Colonel Yarri. Nikos could have slit his throat and escaped alone. Those bulls in Pamplona should have killed him. Why didn't they? Blind love suffocated him on two occasions, but not enough to kill him. He knows he died a thousand times in the arms of Braiden. Any number of moments could have pitched him into his grave. Yet here he is, in paradise, and not every road on the journey of life leads to paradise.

Flashes of lightning, far off in the distance, bewitch his meagre dinner and he ties a sheet of plastic over the branch knowing that in Africa a flash of lightning on the horizon will crash upon you and drag you into hell.

The darkness under the sheet of plastic is dense and Roland wriggles about the bare patch of earth trying for a more comfortable bedding. The ribs of mother earth torture his hips. He lies on his back looking out between his feet at the trunk of the tree. The overhanging branch scratches against his head.

A roll of thunder sounds closer.

The tree moves. Roland can hear the bark creaking. Dust swirls in his face. In a flash of lightening he sees a figure leaning against the tree opposite him. Then another. Dark hooded silhouettes gnawing at the bark. No, they are clawing at it.

Roland crawls from under the plastic sheet and freezes.

Two cheetah sharpen their claws against the trunk of the tree. They can smell him. He can smell them. The one looks directly at him its eyes narrow and fixed. Roland dare not move. A

flash of lightning reveals three more cheetah squatting in the grass, their heads low, and their bodies taut. The first drop of rain thuds against the plastic. Then another. One cheetah stands. Another follows. As the rain falls the cheetah move off. Only one holds its ground, facing Roland.

In a flash Roland slaps the plastic sheet.

“Fuck off! Go away!” He yells.

And the cheetah flee.

Big and brave and victorious Roland leaps after them yelling, “Out! Out! Out!” And runs in the rain his heart pounding.

A bolt of lightning strikes the earth nearby and Roland scrambles back under the plastic and snaps it closed.

The storm thrashes him. It plays no game, sure of its attack, and takes control meaning to sweep Roland aside, a mere wisp of inconsequence. It flings the plastic into the night and drenches him in seconds. Roland grabs his blanket and races for the bakkie. He crawls in and cowers at the mercy of the storm. The branch of his tree breaks off. And Girlie rocks violently from side to side, water pouring in around the doors and windscreen. Roland wedges his feet against the roof and falls asleep, his blanket soggy and cold.

Dawn breaks crisp and clean the earth cleansed and the wounds on the hill slopes washed. Roland’s clothing and the blanket will dry and so will the cab, but he knows another storm will come and wipe him out. He cannot survive without a proper shelter. So he shifts his priority from the bravado of living in paradise to the practical necessity of a brick and mortar home.

After a hurried breakfast of cold milk and a rusk, he walks back to the old house he had passed on the way in yesterday. The earth hot underfoot even though the sun has only just crawled above the koppie. The grass seeds cling to his hairy legs and his sandals squelch in the sweat between his toes. An open patch of ground, crossed by a hundred hooves confuses him, teasing him to follow or walk on alone. A million ants pour from the surrounding bush each with a load clasped in their pincers. A blade of grass. A shaft of a leaf. A feather, the leg of a beetle, chunks of a dead animal, a moth still alive. And they all move *en masse* across the clearing and disappear into a hole in the ground. Roland follows the footprints of the herd and his excitement rises as he finds an owl feather. A tuft of hair hangs on a thorn. Wet droppings dot the path and he sees a torn hoof of an antelope covered in ants. He ducks under a low branch and scrambles up the slope of a koppie climbing to higher ground.

He stops to pull a tic from his leg and crushes it between his thumbnails.

A crashing in the bushes startles him and a warthog breaks cover. It freezes. Snorts and runs off in a cloud of dust. Tinkling rocks warn him of an animal scrambling ahead. It stops. Roland cannot see it, but hears it breathing.

Giant slate heaps mark the gold diggings of the old miners who scoured these mountains in search of gold. And they found gold, not much, enough to die for, only in isolated mushrooms and never in rich veins. Poor Mother Earth, bruised and broken, forced to surrender her wealth and now abandoned as worthless.

“I come to find life not to plunder,” Roland says.

A grasshopper clings to his knee refusing to let go even when he flicks at it.

“Let go,” Roland warns it.

“No! I won’t,” it says.

“If you pee on me I’ll smack you.”

“You could die tonight,” the grasshopper replies.

“What did you say?” Roland asks. “That I could die tonight. Huh! That’s pretty damn far sighted for a grasshopper.”

And to reverse the prophesy Roland crushes it.

The earth is red, ochre red, cracked and scorched. The sun strikes him on the left, a fierce blow, and he pulls his hat over his cheek. His nose still runs and his leg still bleeds. He remembers, Sally had said the same to him once, not that she and the grasshopper offer the same prophetic truths, but she too had threatened to kill him. When he touched her. And she started to shiver. Then he took it too far and touched her again.

“No more,” she had said leaping up. “Or I’ll kill you.”

First the give and then the take. Pure Sally and according to her scale of balance the take always more.

Roland marvels at the isolation and vastness of the farm, Kopiri Marindi. As he walks he tries to imagine the size of four thousand hectares. That’s a staggering number and he repeats it just to make sure. Yes, that’s what she had said, four thousand hectares. And the farm is cut through by a dry river bed, with a gravel road linking it to a trading store twelve kilometres away. The odd truck rattles along that road tempting fate rather than run into a traffic check point on the main route east to the Mozambique border.

“It’s big,” Rose had warned Roland when first they met. “And you’ll be way down the other end,” and she laughed. “We may never see you.”

“Oh yes we will,” Norris had snapped.

In the local Black dialect the name Kopiri Marindi means ‘*Place of the Mountains*’, and twelve piles of granite rock rising imperiously out of the ground proves it. Savannah grassland covers the one side of the farm, as flat and beautiful as anything you’ll ever see up north in Kenya. A granite ridge divides the lowlands from the twelve mountains, called koppies, each bordered by a gully cluttered with the broken scree of the weathered rocks. The vegetation varies from the grasslands, with acacia trees dotted here and there, the lush green river bed, and the seemingly barren slopes of the koppies. Dead hardwood trees, many of them still standing, create majestic features all of their own and compliment the granite rocks of the mountains. The steep slopes are rich in a variety of small shrubs and flowers whose blooming glorifies the bounty of spring.

“We sold all the cattle,” Rose had added with a sigh.

“I am blessed,” Roland said wanting to share more of his joy at being given the opportunity to live in such a wonderland than hear of the cattle’s demise.

“The old boy feels it,” Rose added nodding towards Norris. “He’s been at it for twenty years...no more. I don’t know...too long really. Although I’ll miss the manure,” and she wrinkled her nose. “Pure gold,” she said, “and perfect for the roses.”

“Huh! Old boy,” Norris sniggered. “Is that me, huh?”

“You know what I mean,” Rose had added snuggling up to him.

Norris had spun around to warn Roland. “And if I have to come to you I’ll bring my rifle,” and he chucked in the excitement of chasing Roland with a rifle.

“See...always the hunter,” and Rose had smiled weakly at Roland, and then sighed again. “Ah! At least the flowers aren’t trampled,” she said.

Roland shared a grin with Rose; hers for the young gun of a husband, his for the loss of life.

Insects, birds and reptiles abound. Wild animals wander at will held only by the security fence around the perimeter of the farm. Kopiri Marindi in Roland’s language means, *heaven on earth*, the vast expanse of emptiness virgin territory untouched by man.

Roland picks his way through the donga of the dry river bed and up the embankment.

What once used to be the garden of the old house now differs little from the surrounding bush, the stones marking the borders still visible, the plants long since dead. The back yard bare earth, even the paths that used to crisscross from the house to the garage have been blown away by the wind. The fence hangs in disrepair, a sorry sight of its glory days, and the water tank leans over at a crazy angle, the base planks having rotted away. The roof has caved in on the one side and the entire front wall cracked so severely Roland puts his fist through the gaps and waves into thin air. Few windows remain intact and none of them close, the latches having been pilfered.

He reconnoitres the old house thinking of building himself a shelter and decides on the lounge area. The roof more solid, although hanging in the one corner, but at least there are three solid walls enclosing most of it. No other room that secure. The toilet and bathroom are both wrecks; the toilet smashed and the whole one side of the bath cracked. But Roland can see the potential. Broken out, refurbished and plastered he could make it work again...and quickly. Four days and he could have a functional home.

Water the biggest challenge.

Roland searches the yard for the water pipes coming in from the reservoir. The pipes against the bathroom wall indicate their direction back towards the cattle kraal, but all underground and impossible to tell exactly where they join the main line.

He forces the doors of a tin shed open sufficiently for him to see rolls of plastic piping inside and stacked to the roof. Obviously enough for his needs. And in various sizes, the smaller diameter pipes not mixed with the bigger rolls. Every cattle farm of this size has the same water issue; the cribs in the camps are far from the main bore hole and reservoir. At Kopiri Marindi each crib is three, sometimes four kilometres apart. That means three to four kilometres of piping. And a warthog can dig up and destroy a few hundred meters in one night. No wonder there are so many rolls stacked in that shed.

As Roland approaches the back door into the old house a four meter black mamba slithers into a hole in the kitchen wall. Roland measures the distance from the passage to the hole; four meters; four big steps. And he shudders at the power of such a

creature. The head had already slithered out of sight as the last of the tail appeared. There is enough poison in four meters to kill an ox and one blow of its head would knock him senseless. They are known to stand on their tails and chase after their prey, not because they are hungry, just for the fun of it. Now Mr Mamba has adopted the old house as his residence.

“You’re not welcome,” Roland warns him and blocks the hole with a rock.

That means he will come out some other place. There are too many holes to cover. So Roland replaces the rock with a dish of water.

“Maybe, if I am kind he’ll leave me alone?”

Roland creeps back into the kitchen, nervous now of Mr Mamba and the terrifying consequences of meeting him again. He’s obviously not a plumber or carpenter and doesn’t mind living in a mess, but everyone to their taste. So the saying goes.

“My problem is I want to stay here,” and Roland tiptoes into the lounge area.

He hears it first, a skating sound behind him.

Mr Mamba is on the move. And moving in his direction.

Roland turns, just in time to see the mamba slither down the passage and into the kitchen.

“Got you,” Roland says.

He backs out of the lounge and races around to the kitchen door.

The mamba does not appear.

“He’s inside,” Roland congratulates himself.

In the garage he finds a stack of half rotten planks and a broken door and carries them into the house, using the veranda as the safest point of entry. So far so good. Mr Mamba must be back in his hole. Roland blocks the passageway and the door into the lounge with the planks and broken door, forcing the mamba to exit through the kitchen should he venture out again.

And he does.

First only the head.

“My God,” Roland says. “That’s only his head.”

Then slowly, bit by bit, the neck, all four meters of it, to the tip of its tail. It must have swallowed one of those toilet pipes, the body too fat for a human hand to hold. Roland turns, swivelling on the balls of his feet, poised like the karate kid, ready for the fight. The mamba raises itself, tail only an arm length still on the floor, tongue flicking, in a dance and bobbing, the eyes flat and towering above Roland, the head above the door. And so it sways, focused, figuring where to strike. Roland stands, not a muscle twitches, his mouth dry, his eyes fixed on the mamba, burning.

The mamba strikes, in slow motion, and the fight begins. Then another strike, again slow motion stuff, jab and jab again working in the lethal strike. Roland parries each blow, the head of the snake sliding across his arm and over his shoulder. And they turn together, holding the centre spot on the floor. Again their eyes lock. And again the mamba strikes, more forcibly, pulling back, not striking through. And Roland skips around to hold the centre again.

“Fuck you,” he says.

“That’s not very polite.”

“I know but...”

And the mamba moves forward and Roland backwards.

“...I’m here to stay,” Roland says and he hisses as if he too were a snake.

The mamba strikes and Roland parries the blow, punching the head of the snake with the side of his fist. In a flash the snake turns on Roland catching him stone dead in his tracks, and climbs to his full height slithering over Roland’s shoulder. It lies flat on the ground, only its head moving. Roland too sways, mimicking the snake.

So they dance.

END OF THE SAMPLE READ: THANK YOU