

# Trials

08/12/05 Daily Trials

Masurri, my boatman, showed me a fray in the braided Dacron line. All I could think was 'it's hard to fray that kind of line', and then 'and this is the third frayed line I've paid to have replaced in just the past few weeks'. That's when the thought insidiously planted itself inside my head...What if this wasn't natural fraying, what if it was actually man-made instead? What if this was actually an elaborate hoax, a money-making scheme...See, my paranoia went like this:

Common boat yard wisdom holds that everybody's broke so they must be on the take. Never mind that there's no proof, you've just got to figure - if you were that poor you'd do it, so that probably makes it true. And once you've armed yourself with this type of baseless paranoia, by God, it's amazing how quickly you'll think you've witnessed your prophecies come true.

Take our trip to Tarangire for instance...

Okay, there was a lot going on up at Tarangire, some of which I probably shouldn't tell - but then, you know me, so here goes. First off, it's lion country. I mean 'lion' with a capital L. And we had our friends with us - Patti and Riki Lee - visiting from the States. And we were traveling by 'private car', our own, no guide (which might have been a small mistake). And I suppose big old John might have been a warning, as in 'beware the ten ton elephant that guards the gates of hell'. And when we crossed him, he was actually blocking our access to down that path. John's a one-tusker - and that, as we now know, was another clue. A one-tusker is a rogue elephant who has shed a tusk, generally by leaving it planted somewhere - most often, it seems, in someone's 'private car'. John (and I swear that really is his name, everyone up there knows him - he's got the demeanor of a professional wrestler and a gash the size of Kansas on his face), John chased us a little while but I told my driver, Nancy, to step on it because I had the map and I knew we'd find lions up the road if we could just out-pace the great gray monster with the bloody face.

A few minutes later I was still sure there were lions around but I was no longer quite so sure we should be on that road. It wasn't so much that there wasn't another car around - or even a tire track for that matter (John, it seemed, had been doing his job well). It was more that it was getting into late afternoon and I had started thinking, 'no working phone, no radio, just a pack of matches and a pocket knife'. Then I started thinking about the possibility of breaking down - I mean even of having just a flat. Sure, we had a spare...but all I could think about were the Lions (note, still spelled with that capital L).

Anyway, we actually managed to do just fine, and now I swear I won't do it again, but the point of all that is that that's how we ended up having a celebratory dinner at which - in celebration - I ordered us a Second Bottle of Wine. And as luck would have it, that's where this story actually begins:

So there we are, with the sommelier topping off our glasses from the newly corked Second Bottle of Wine. He put it back in the new ice bucket beside the old ice bucket and then spirited it away. The question of which 'it' it was that was spirited didn't arise until I went to top us off again. When I lifted the 'new' bottle, I found that it was dry, and - through the fog of our celebratory bliss - try as we might we couldn't really be certain of whether 'dry' was what we might call the bottle's 'natural' or 'unnatural' bottle-state. Me, of course, me thinks me smells a Rat so, I begin to devise a plan....

Well, suffice it to say there is every chance that they remember me at that hotel. Suffice it to say that despite my sleuthing and the castigations that I spread (where I should have been spreading tips), the bottle remained dry, as dry as I remained the entire following day in penance. And it is probably a very lucky thing that the Tanzanians are all so damn polite or I might have actually caused a fuss. Instead, the whole incident was written off as what might best be labelled a little 'cross-cultural exchange'.

So now remember back to the beginning where I'm looking at Massuri who's holding up this little frayed bit of rope, and remember that I'm thinking that there seem to have been several other frays...and I guess you've figured how the rest of the story goes. It's more or less the same as what happened in Tarangire, only John wasn't there to tip me off that I was heading down the entirely wrong path. But then I have to ask you, where in the hell are the John's of this world when you really need them? Because I swear, I'm getting really tired of all the cross cultural lessons I'm doling out &ndash; particularly as the only one who's learning any lessons (or at least the same one over and over) is me!