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A SMALL KNIFE AND A BIG DILEMMA

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ALL REGULAR VISITORS TO KRUGER will no doubt have had at least one extraordinary experience that they would wish to one day share with their grandchildren. Having visited the Park over a period of well over 25 years, we have several stories to tell, but one in particular stands out starkly above the rest.

It happened one morning in the early nineties, not long after we entered the Park at Malelane Gate. It was the impala rutting season, so it wasn't long before we encountered the first rams challenging one another for dominance over a nearby herd of females. As is usual during this time of the year, we came across several fascinating episodes of loud snorting, clashing horns, grunting and furious pursuits through the trees.

On the tarred road leading to Berg-en-Dal rest camp, we stopped to watch a particular pair having a very serious go at one another, kicking up dust and stones as they locked horns. It was fascinating to watch, and after some minutes the weaker of the two eventually capitulated, turned and ran away, with the victor in hot pursuit. We pulled off again slowly and had barely gone a few metres when the pair reappeared again suddenly from the thick bush. The one in front dashed across the road immediately in front of us, missing the minibus by a fraction. The victor, very close behind, veered sharply to the left to miss us, but its hooves slipped on the hard tar surface and it fell heavily and slid under the vehicle. There was a sickening thump as the left rear wheel then ran over it.

We stopped immediately and, rules or no rules, got out of the car. It was an appalling sight. The ram, in the prime of its life, was lying in the road kicking furiously and bleating loudly, with what was obviously a severely broken back. We had to make a decision: do we simply ignore it and drive away leaving it to die a long and painful death, we asked,

or do we put it out of its misery? The latter was the only humane thing to do. But how?

The only method at our disposal, we came to realise, was to cut its throat. But dare we even try? In the Kruger National Park of all places. Not just that, but the only knife at our disposal was a tiny Joseph Rodgers pen knife – with a blade not much bigger than you’d find on a pair of nail scissors.

By that point other visitors had pulled up and were watching wide-eyed with astonishment at what we were about to do.

After some more brief debate, we reluctantly jumped into action. One of us held down the flying hooves – not without some difficulty – while the other turned and pulled the head back to expose the neck, the little knife at the ready. Having grown up within the hunting culture I knew exactly where to make the initial cut, but the remainder of the grisly deed was easier said than done. With such a small knife, it required what felt like an endless series of agonising, and at times forceful, cuts and thrusts to get to and eventually sever the spine, with the impala still bleating and kicking out viciously.

With the deed done, there was silence again and we sat back with bloodied hands and arms and shirts, exhausted from the exertion and shocked by what we had just been impelled to do. Goodness knows what went through the minds of the gawking onlookers.

We pulled the carcass some distance into the bush, marked the crime scene by tying knots in the tall grass, and drove on to Berg-en-Dal where we nervously reported the incident. Our by now well-rehearsed story, far-fetched as we thought it was, was simply accepted in good faith and noted. The section ranger was radioed, and one of us was asked to explain what happened and where the incident took place. That was it.

The next day we paid a courtesy visit to the ranger to more fully explain what had happened and apologise for the incident. He listened quietly, nodding understandingly, and then, unbelievably, thanked us for the fresh meat we had provided to his staff.

We still have the little knife – in fact, I have carried it around in my pocket every day since. But I can thankfully say that it has no additional notches on its handle marking the slaughter of any other antelope.