

Silver Stallion Tours

‘I’m going to photograph the horses at sunrise tomorrow. Anyone want to join me?’

I could see the slight restlessness of my group as they hesitated, considering their options. Johan’s wonderful spread of Namibia’s finest cuisine was demolished. Coffee and red wine was on the table.

During the afternoon’s drive from Aus I’d given my group of Cape Town pensioners the standard talk about the horses, though probably most of them had been asleep. I’d tried to make the story evocative, infusing it with the emotion that the horses gave me each time I saw them. These days very few people had any connection to the Great War or with the horses left behind in what had been German West Africa. The horses had been spared the gunfire and bloody destruction of the fighting but their fate was every bit as desolate – abandoned by the retreating Germans, unwanted by the local farmers, left to survive as best they could: orphans of the conflict and victims of the peace.

However, the hardiest had survived, even multiplied and now, one hundred years later, the sizeable herd was a tourist attraction on the road to Luderitz. Not the glossy racehorse type of attraction or the wild galloping of the horses of the Camargue. It was more the ragged, dusty attraction of hard-won survival by symbols of four-legged fortitude.

At least, that is the story I liked to tell.

I waited. It wasn’t the horses that made them hesitate; it was the temperature and the early hour after a long day’s drive. But the best time to be at the reservoir was before dawn to be ready as the horses were backlit by the silky pale rays as the sun rose from behind the mountains.

Sheila, of the bright red lipstick and the equally bright red hair spoke. ‘Not me, thanks, Steff. I’m going to have a nice long lie in tomorrow.’ She raised her glass to me. ‘Enjoy.’

There were other murmurings of agreement. No problem. I’d no hesitation in going on my own.

I pushed back my chair, nodded goodnight and walked out into the crisp darkness. As I crunched along the track to my cabin I looked up at the great swathe of prickling sharp stars above and breathed in the chill with satisfaction. I was young and new to tour leading, this only my second trip since I’d gone out on my own with Silver Stallion Tours. I loved my job and took seriously the responsibilities and the pleasures that came with small, exclusive tours.

The next morning, as my little bus grumbled through the pre-dawn darkness, I had to swerve to avoid a figure walking up the track ahead. Startled to find anyone out so early, I slowed and opened my window, calling: 'Good morning.'

The ambient glow of my headlights revealed a young woman, muffled and scarfed against the chill, looking up at me. Startled, I said: 'Can I give you a lift somewhere? I'm going to photograph the horses.'

A little, snatching breeze caught the woman's dark hair as she nodded, unspeaking and walked round to the passenger side. I leaned over to open the door and she climbed in silently.

I accelerated carefully. 'So, where to?' Then, when that produced no response, I hazarded: 'Are you staying at the Lodge?' I thought perhaps Johan might have told her that I was going out this morning.

At last she spoke: 'I am going to the horses'. A soft, cultured voice, slight British accent – Brit tourist, I thought. They always think it's safe to go anywhere, any time.

Being the friendly tour guide type, I said: 'I'm Steff. I'm the owner of Silver Stallion Tours.'

No reply. Then, just when I thought she wasn't going to respond, she said, 'My name is Jane. This is where I have been living,' and turned her head away to stare out of the window.

Okay, clearly not a morning person.

We rocked and bounced in silence, headlights making bright pencils of light over the track ahead, the creaking of the shock absorbers the only sound. Insects skittered like tiny leaves, disturbed by our passing, and once the bright red eyes of a night prowler glowed briefly in the low bushes, then the unseen animal blinked out of existence.

The going was smoother once we reached the tarred highway. At the reservoir paddock I scrunched the bus off the highway, coming to a gravelly halt near the big stone shelter in swirl of grey dust. As I jumped down from the bus, the woman opened her door and slid down without assistance.

Again the tour guide in me obliged me to say: 'Don't be afraid of the horses, they don't expect anything from humans. They don't associate us with food. They just come for the water. Once the sun is up they will move off again.' I pointed away to the dim south. 'See, there's another line of them coming through the foothills.'

Jane watched the horses. 'I'm not afraid. Thank you for the lift.' She turned and walked away, footsteps crunching steadily in the pre-dawn quiet, towards the far side of the shelter.

I took the hint.

Dark equine shapes stood patiently around, waiting, as they had been waiting all their lives, for something to happen. I wandered out amongst the dim beasts, looking to position myself in the best spot for the shots I would take when the sun came up over the distant mountain range.

The herd mostly ignored me. The air was still and quiet, apart from the occasional harrumphing outburst of breath from steamy nostrils or the hollow clop of slow hooves on flinty outcrops. The mercury silver surface of the distant reservoir reflected the washed-out sky.

I moved among the bodies, careful not to disturb the languorous choreography around me. Occasionally a huge head turned towards me, silent as a giant flower on a thick flexible stem. Eyes glinted, ears flicked like birds wings half seen, half imagined.

The line of horses I had seen away to the south arrived at the reservoir and dipped their heads to drink just as the sun's rays shimmered into the sky like a child's drawing. I waited, patient as the horses, for the moment when I knew the silence and calm would suddenly splinter.

I was ready when two stallions abruptly rose up on their hind legs, tatty and desert worn but filled with fiery competitiveness that made them whinny, unshod hooves striking out, lunging with threatening teeth in stretched mouths. The fine dust they churned up turned to pale gold as the sunlight glinted through it. Each rearing curve was backlit to perfection, the whipping manes tipped with light, as the black and the silver fought for a brief supremacy. The herd near them jerked away, trotting just out of range, to stand once more in head-down apathy. I ducked and clicked, twisted and crouched, totally focussed on the hasty conflict, the instinct-driven power-play.

Then it was over and the antagonists dropped back to all fours, standing near each other, heavy breath smoking the air as they allowed the moment to pass before heading to the water to drink, momentary antipathy forgotten in an unbloodied resolution.

Only when I strolled back to the shelter did I wonder briefly how my mystery passenger was getting on. I rounded the corner and almost bumped into a shrivelled little man standing with his back to me, gazing out across the paddock. I noticed his small worker's tent pitched outside one wall of the shelter, some shovels and buckets nearby. His ragged clothing, the colour of the desert, smelled faintly of smoke and unwashed body. Startled, I greeted him with 'Mwa lele po', the only phrase I know in Oshiwambo. He didn't turn, just stared into the distance. And muttered something I didn't understand.

I followed his gaze. There, far out among the horses, was Jane. I mean, really far out. She was walking, fast and steady through the dust towards the sunrise, as oblivious of the standing horses as they were of her. I was about to call out when I saw a figure coming out of the golden haze towards her. A man, too distant for me to see properly, the sun directly behind him.

Jane started to run. The horses didn't even turn their heads.

I drew an astonished breath then felt the old man catch my coat in a filthy, coppery hand. I glared, affronted, and tried to pull away but the old man, slender as the parched grasses, had a grip that was iron and granite. He stared ahead, impassive.

I turned again to look for Jane and the man but now the horses were moving against the sun's rays, the dust cloud thickening, churned by their hooves and the rising breeze. I thought I caught a glimpse of her dark coat, the man's head, then my eyes began to water and I could see nothing more than the gentle rippling movement as the horses swayed into the distance. Belatedly, I called out: 'Hey, Jane!'

I peeled the old man's hand from my arm, demanding ineffectually: 'What happened?' He looked straight at me, dark eyes blank in his expressionless face. Then he said, roughly: 'She come to horse. He come to horse. Horse are with them. Them go.' Then repeated: 'Go' and, almost as though he was dismissing me, turned and ducked under his tent flap.

Driven by an uncomfortable, unnamed anxiety, I began to run out towards the reservoir, zig-zagging, calling, until I realised I was running for no reason. Of Jane and the man there was no sign and no sight. No direction to follow, no footprints on the desiccated earth.

Reluctant pragmatism overcame anxiety and, my own breath now smoking in the chill, I trudged back to the bus, cursing the bad manners of early morning hitchhikers and, unfairly I know, the Lodge's guests in general. I gunned the engine and roared, tight-lipped, back to the Lodge planning just what I'd say to mine host.

'Johan!' I shouted, as I stamped up the steps into reception, 'What the hell kind of guests do have around here!' In the dining room, some early guests looked up from their eggs and bacon, staring.

Johan, emerged from the kitchen, eyed my face briefly then took my arm and pulled me into the dim, deserted bar. The smell of old beer made me feel slightly sick. He called for coffee then thrust me into an armchair and sat down opposite me.

'Steffanie,' he rumbled, 'Calm down and tell me what happened.'

When I'd finished my frustrations of how I had lost a passenger just when I was supposed to be consolidating my burgeoning career as a tour leader, I whined about bad mannered tourists and the dangers of heedless foreigners, until, feeling a bit stupid, my words trailed off. Johan sat silent for a long moment. Then he asked: 'What's today's date?' He squinted down at his watch. 'Ah, yes, I should have warned you. Happens this time every year. She is usually seen walking on the road to the reservoir but she got lucky with you this morning.'

Then he told me about the young English girl who had fallen in love with a German soldier during WWI, how they had run away together when her parents had objected, taking horses and disappearing into the uncaring desert, never to be seen again.

I spluttered on a mouthful of cool coffee. 'Oh come on! Ghost stories at dawn? You've got to be kidding me!'

Johan patted my shoulder. 'The desert is a funny old place, isn't it? I think when you go to Luderitz later this morning you'll find that the old man and the tent have also disappeared. I never understood his connection to them but he's there every year too.'

I sat very still for a while after Johan had gone. Then I thought to check the images on my camera but, of course, there was nothing there except the dark horse and the pale horse, on their hind-legs, in their own private, golden dust cloud.