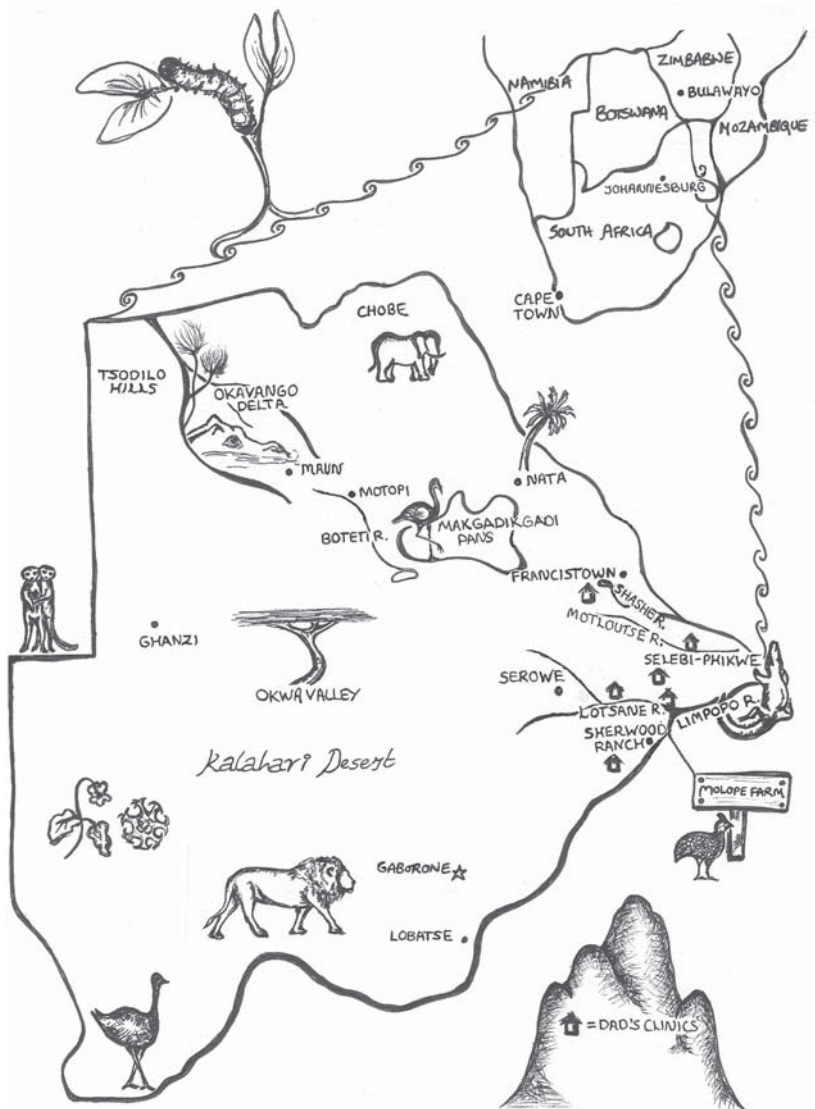
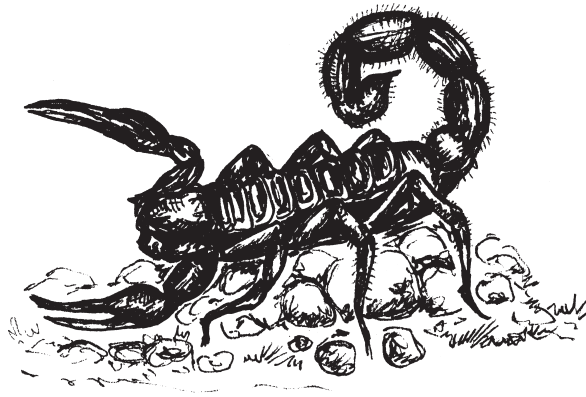


TWENTY CHICKENS
FOR A SADDLE

Map of Botswana



GRANDPA'S VISITORS



Above the bush, the pink and orange streaked sky had faded to grey. Inside, it was almost dark, and Grandpa, in his chair beneath the room's only window, caught the last of the light. He sat completely still, smiling at our confusion.

His whisper had silenced the conversation. "Look who's joining us for drinks," he had said. But nothing had moved. The door remained closed, the cat curled peacefully on the sofa. No new sounds interrupted the soft ring of chirps, rustles, and faraway hunting barks.

We waited for an explanation. He gave none. His gaze alternated between us and the ceiling; his body remained still. One hand clutched a small glass, full with an equal mixture of red

wine and grape juice; the other lay on the armrest, long fingers digging into the worn velvet covers.

Then a flicker near the ceiling, and a shadowy creature plunged out of the gloom.

Just above his head, close enough to brush wisps of thin white hair, it stopped—a giant brown moth, suspended with an unsteady flutter. The moth, joined moments later by a second, began a jolting orbit of his head.

Grandpa gave a satisfied grunt. He lifted his glass and took a small sip. The moths, ignoring him, continued to circle, and just as carefully, he lowered the glass again. He sat motionless, his lips taut and flattened. He hadn't swallowed, and as his eyes followed the moths, a drop of liquid grew at each corner of his mouth, pausing just before it was full enough to slide down his jaw.

Suddenly, a dark butterfly shadow eclipsed his cheek: one of the moths, wings flat against his face, long proboscis reaching for a drop. The second moth descended on the opposite cheek. The first flapped away. It was magical and ridiculous: the ghostly, clumsy creatures taking off and settling again; Grandpa, until then so fiercely intimidating, looking like a gentle, badly painted clown.

He smiled at those dowdy moths as if they were beloved pets; and only when they left, when the last traces of daylight had vanished and a paraffin lamp spluttered to life in the corner of the room, did he return his attention to his audience.

"Nice trick, Ivor," said Dad, as the moths joined clouds of insects that appeared out of nowhere to dive-bomb the lamp. "But what these kids really want to see are snakes."

"Whaddaya say?" Grandpa leaned forwards and cupped his hand behind his ear. His voice was high-pitched and sounded strange coming from such a tall, imposing man. Squeezed between Mum and the cat on the sofa, Damien and I stifled a laugh. Lulu didn't manage, giggled, and buried her head in Mum's lap.

Dad repeated himself.

"Hard to please, eh?" Grandpa fixed his gaze on each of us, half amused, half accusing. He turned back to Dad.

"Keith," said Grandpa, pointing to a frayed brown armchair in the corner of the room. "Show the kids what's under that chair."

Dad raised an eyebrow and smiled, but didn't enquire further. He stood up and walked slowly towards the chair. "Come on, chaps," he said, grabbing the armrest, "not suddenly scared are you?"

We all shook our heads. None of us moved. I didn't trust myself to speak. Desperate as I was to see snakes, after all Dad's stories about Grandpa Ivor's wild, laugh-in-the-face-of-danger life, the prospect of whatever lay beneath that chair in this strange house was suddenly terrifying.

I turned to Granny Betty, who sat quietly at the end of the long sofa, stroking the cat with a bony hand. An amused smile flickered across her face, but she remained silent.

"Go on," said Mum, smiling encouragingly, "Dad and Grandpa Ivor know what they're doing. This is what you've been waiting for."

Grandpa glared at us. "Stand behind your father if you're scared," he bellowed.

At least as scared of Grandpa's disapproval, Lulu, Damien, and I reluctantly slid off the sofa and squatted behind Dad, who, with his legs as far back as possible, leaned forwards and began to pivot the chair slowly sideways.

Holding our breath, poised to flee, we peered under the rising base.

A black creature, a little smaller than my hand, crouched statue-like on the concrete floor. At one end were pincers, evil-looking but tiny compared with the fat, hairy tail, sharply pointed at the tip, which curled up and forwards over the wide body. Perfect, regular seams joined shiny black segments of the tail, body, and pincers, making it seem more like an exquisitely made machine than a real animal.

Dad whistled. "Black hairy thick-tailed scorpion," he said,

emphasizing each word. “If you can’t see a snake on your first day, this is as good as it gets.”

“Could easily kill one of you chaps,” added Grandpa.

But the scorpion didn’t seem to be in the mood for killing anyone. It took off with ungraceful speed, scuttling towards the wall, where it disappeared under a bookcase. Dad offered to try and catch it, but Grandpa said there were so many in the house already that Dad should just “leave the little bugger where he is.”

Botswana is more than two-thirds desert. Selebi—Grandpa’s home and our destination on that first, bewildering day just before Christmas in 1987—is in the other third, which gets just enough rain to miss out on the glamorous distinction of desert, and much too little to settle the ubiquitous red dust or support any but the hardiest of plants. Except for a few months of the year, that is, when the occasional storm cloud bursts and fat raindrops puff dust into the air and pummel sheets of water that flood the baked ground. In a good rainy season, the dry riverbeds that thread their way east to the Limpopo River might flow. Often they don’t. For nine months of the year, it is hot; for the rest, it is dry.

There is no time of year when it is not hot or dry.

A hundred and fifty kilometres from Selebi, the borders of Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe meet at the country’s easternmost tip. Here the Limpopo peels away from Botswana and heads towards the Indian Ocean. Botswana is securely landlocked. At any point in the country you are at least four hundred kilometres from the sea. But making up for the absence of sea and lakes, spilling hundreds of kilometres across the dry sands in the north, lies the world’s largest inland delta.

The bush surrounding the exquisite Okavango Delta, the “jewel of the Kalahari,” teems with all of Africa’s biggest and most impressive wildlife.

The bush around Selebi teems with cows, goats, and donkeys. There are few fences, and the animals wander mostly unimpeded across the flat land. They are frequently killed on the roads, hit by local cars or huge trucks passing through on their long journeys

between southern and central Africa. The land is overgrazed, and any lions, elephants, and rhinos that weren't hunted left long ago in search of places with more food and fewer people. Only the small, dangerous animals, like snakes and scorpions, which don't mind living alongside humans, are left. For by Botswana standards—a country the size of France with fewer than two million people—the region is populous. Cattle posts of five to twenty huts are sprinkled across the bush, and there are several bigger villages, the largest of which have electricity and running water.

Selebi, which appears on maps as Selebi-Phikwe, consists of just three old houses and several concrete slabs that were once houses. A relic from the early years of the nearby copper and nickel mine, Selebi is the ghost part of town. By the late 1980s, when my parents abruptly decided to return to Botswana—ending a peripatetic decade that had spanned South Africa, England, and New Zealand, and produced three children—Grandpa Ivor and Granny Betty had long been Selebi's sole residents.

Phikwe, which lies ten kilometres away, is the real town; home, when we arrived, to around 40,000 people, most who directly or indirectly derived their living from the mine. Among them were Grandpa Terry and Granny Joan, Mum's parents, who like most Phikwe residents visited the old town only in passing, travelling to or from the little bush airport that, together with the nearby mineshaft and Grandpa Ivor's house, comprised the only still used part of Selebi.

The airport had a tall glass control tower, two faded orange windsocks, and a small customs and immigration building. It was here that my brother, sister, and I first set foot in Botswana, unloaded onto the baking tarmac with the eight frozen turkeys that Grandpa Ivor had packed under the seats when he collected us in Johannesburg.

I was nearly seven, Damien was five, and Lulu was three.

The air on the runway smacked us like a hot wave.

Snakes, lions, and every other fantasy vanished. Heat overwhelmed me as I stood, stunned, in the fierce, dry, completely still air. It was unfairly, unbelievably hot, heat like nothing I had ever felt before. Normal thought, in this temperature and blinding

light, was suddenly impossible. Mesmerised, I watched shimmering waves float above the dark tar. Beyond the runway fence posts, the flat green scrub seemed frozen behind the wobbling veil of heat. The almost white sky was empty; nothing stirred in the bushes; a few black cows stood motionless, sleeping beside the fence.

Heat was the only thing moving.

Mum and Dad seemed unperturbed, smiling and chatting as they hauled bags out of the plane. Lulu, Damien, and I stood, bewildered, sheltering in the shadow of the wing, quietly waiting for instructions. Eventually, with all our suitcases retrieved, we left Grandpa Ivor fiddling with the switches in the cockpit, and Mum and Dad herded us towards the small building beside the control tower.

Inside, it was breathlessly stuffy and not much cooler. A small fan whirred ineffectively from a stand on the concrete floor in the corner of the room. After an unexplained wait—there was no one else in the queue—a uniformed customs officer instructed Mum and Dad to open all our suitcases on a scratched wooden desk. With a suspicious scowl, he began slowly rummaging through layer after layer of clothes, books, and toys. He looked disappointed each time he reached the bottom of a bag.

“Why’s he taking so long?” I whined. “What’s he looking for?”

“Nothing.” Mum squeezed my shoulder.

“I’m so hot.”

“Shhh, Robbie,” hissed Dad.

“Why are you smiling like that?” As soon as the officer had approached us, Mum and Dad’s excited-to-be-back smiles had been replaced by fixed, unconvincing grins.

Both ignored me and continued to grin wildly at the slow, grumpy officer.

Then suddenly the officer was grinning too. “*Dumela*, Mr. Scott,” he said, as Grandpa Ivor, carrying a bulging sack, strode towards the desk.

As they exchanged greetings in quick, soft Setswana, a pud-

dle spread across the floor beneath the sack of defrosting turkeys. The officer didn't seem to notice. Still smiling, he turned to Dad. "Ee! The Madala's son," he said warmly. "Welcome to Botswana."

Ignoring the dripping sack and the unchecked suitcases, he stamped our forms and waved us on. Minutes later, we were outside, uncomfortably installed in the tiny, battered pickup truck that Grandpa called his *bakkie*. Mum and Lulu sat in the front; Dad, Damien, and I in the back, wedged amongst the bags and seven turkeys. Grandpa kept the last one out. "Christmas spirit," he said, striding back towards the building, the dripping bird clutched under his arm. He disappeared inside, emerging, empty-handed, almost immediately.

And one turkey less, we set off to our new home.

Grandpa's house was the last and only stop on an overgrown kilometre-long track that wound through a seemingly endless expanse of small grey thornbushes, short, brilliant green mopane trees, and the occasional graceful knob-thorn tree reaching high above its neighbours. Around the house, all but a few of the tallest trees had been cleared, and the little building stood low and dilapidated on the bare red dirt. With nothing to separate the house and the dirt—no flowerbeds, or paving, or gravel—the dust had crept up the walls and formed a foot-high orange band on the whitewashed bricks.

From a distance, it was hard to see where the house became dirt.

Everything in the house was falling apart; sofas fraying, bedspreads peppered with holes, kitchen counters chipped. The walls were whitewashed, but layers of dust had settled on the ledges where the bricks hadn't been properly aligned. Daylight streamed through every window, but, enclosed by the dusty walls and dark concrete floors, every bright room was nonetheless strangely gloomy.

Dust cloaked and dulled everything: the painting of a sad-looking black lady breastfeeding a baby, a medal hanging on a ribbon, a large black-and-white aerial map. Beneath these—the

only interruptions to the otherwise bare lounge walls—an ostrich egg, a china bell with the faces of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, and a tarnished golf trophy decorated the tops of crowded bookshelves. Where they had been shifted slightly, their old positions were precisely remembered by darker, cleaner circles on the wood.

In Grandpa's tiny, overflowing study, maps and yellowing hand-drawn charts covered the walls almost entirely. Piles of tattered flight log books, some reaching higher than me, leaned precariously against tall grey filing cabinets. Much-fingered books and magazines jostled for space in every corner. In the centre of the room stood a desk with a pale green typewriter, half covered in a sea of papers, scribbled notes, diagrams, and envelopes.

Opposite the intriguing chaos of this room, across a dimly lit corridor, was Granny Betty's study: tidy by comparison, thick with the smell of cigarettes and air freshener, home to a breathtakingly large and unlikely collection. Hundreds of jigsaw-puzzle boxes—big and small, enough to fill the grandest of toyshops—were stacked around the room: atop a dark wardrobe, under a dresser, in an open cupboard. I tried to count them and lost track. The room must have held more than a lifetime's work.

Low tables pushed against the walls displayed three almost finished pictures. Gleaming with bright poppies, country cottages, and sunsets, these made colourful, incongruous interruptions to the sombre furnishings. The puzzles varied in the size and shape of their pieces, but each, caught in its state of incompleteness, was curiously similar. In every vast picture, the gaping holes shared the same blue edges, the same loose blue pieces scattered within them.

"I get so tired of skies." Granny Betty sighed, frowning at one of the blue-rimmed gaps.

Granny Betty, Grandpa Ivor's second wife and Dad's stepmother, sighed as if she were tired of life. Frail, softly spoken, hobbling, she was everything that Grandpa Ivor was not. Even her smile was sad. Only when she laughed, and her face was transformed by shining blue eyes and a wide, white false-teeth grin, did she really look happy.

After showing us the rooms in the centre of the house, Granny

led us out of the back door, passing through a long kitchen, where rubber pipes ran out of an ancient stove, through an oversized hole in the wall, and joined two tall gas cylinders that stood sentry under the window. Outside, a few paces beyond the kitchen door, a rusty freezer sat alone in the middle of the dirt. Its lid was thick with grit, dry leaves, and bird droppings, and a spiky bush had crept halfway up one side.

Supporting herself against the lid, Granny explained that years ago a spitting cobra had slithered into the maze of pipes at the back of the freezer. When, after several hours, the snake had shown no signs of wanting to come out, Grandpa had dragged the freezer outside. He had never got around to taking it back indoors.

Grandpa, unabashed, just laughed, "We're hoping it'll work by solar power!" he announced, patting the freezer and dislodging a small cloud of dust.

Granny and Grandpa slept in a converted veranda at the front of the house, the strangest bedroom I had ever seen. At one end of the long narrow room stood Granny and Grandpa's sagging double bed; at the other, a warped Ping-Pong table, piled high with a jumble of pipes, wood, rolls of plastic, old radios, and unrecognisable machines. Beneath the table, several dusty engines squatted on the concrete floor, crammed tightly beside each other and an assortment of smaller unmemorable objects tossed in amongst them.

At this, the Ping-Pong table side of the room, casting the chaos in a strange soft light, faded green shade cloth stretched from a three-foot-high wall to just below the eaves. Clearly visible through these gauzy windows, just outside the front of the house, stood a haphazardly packed shed the size of a single garage. In the centre of the shed, surrounded by more engines and more junk, rested a battered old aeroplane fuselage. The wings of the aeroplane had been removed. Suspended by fraying loops of rope, they now hung inside, from the bedroom roof—one above the Ping-Pong table, the other above Granny and Grandpa's bed.

To reach the lounge from the driveway, you passed through this oddest of rooms: table on the left, bed on the right, wings

above—meeting at their tips in the middle of the roof. Sometimes, when the door banged closed, the ropes creaked gently.

On that first day in Botswana, nearly everything about the house was surprising. But it was the passage through the front and back doors that would preserve its wonder. Even years later, it would be impossible to walk beneath the old Aeronca wings or pass beside the lonely freezer without the fleeting sensation that everything wasn't quite right; that, as with Granny's jigsaws, the last pieces were missing or misplaced.

Nearby, where the bare dirt ran into thorny bush, a second aeroplane—winged but even more damaged than the first—lay beneath a scraggly thorn tree, disintegrating into the scrub and dust. The red-and-white wreck was the Piper Colt, a part of family legend that, like the Aeronca, I'd felt I had known long before the day the two aeroplanes left the realm of stories, appearing as real objects in this strange new world.

Aeroplanes starred in most of our favourite tales about Grandpa Ivor. And although he'd first flown in the South African Air Force during World War II, the backdrop to these jaw-dropping flying stories was always Botswana, which did not become his home until the early 1960s. After the war, repelled by all associated with a time that had seen the loss of a brother and many of his dearest friends, Grandpa had started a string of unsuccessful businesses, and it was not until his forties, when he left South Africa—and with it Granny Mavis, his first wife, and his three young sons, Henry, Keith, and Jonathan—that flying again became his livelihood.

Based, initially, in a remote bush camp near the Okavango Delta, Grandpa Ivor worked as a commercial pilot, flying the first road builders, the last of the great white hunters, game department officials, mining prospectors, and, for a time, Sir Seretse Khama, Botswana's late, great, beloved first president. With a single plane, a Beechcraft Baron, he established the impressive-sounding Okavango Air Services, one of Botswana's first charter

flight businesses. With the Aeronca, he began to teach flying, going on to found the country's first flying school.

The school's students included Grandpa's own sons, who made yearly visits to Botswana during their school and then university holidays. By the time he came to teach Jonathan, his youngest, Grandpa's infamously scant reserves of patience had been severely depleted. He was by then living in Selebi, where he'd moved in the early 1970s, with the start of the mine. He instructed Jonathan in the Piper Colt. The Aeronca—after a forced landing due to engine failure—was by then languishing in a farmer's field, where Grandpa had simply abandoned the old plane, surrounded by cattle, on the dirt.

After six hours' flying time, father and son were barely speaking. Jonathan protested angrily at Grandpa's intolerance of mistakes. "Fly it yourself, then," yelled Grandpa. Jonathan did, making several uneventful solo flights. Then one day, as he touched down and taxied in towards the Selebi airport building, a whirling tunnel of dirt and leaves sped across the bush towards the runway. Unsure how to handle a dust devil, Jonathan was caught at the wrong angle and the wrong speed. The plane flipped several times, landing upside down on the grass beside the tar.

Jonathan escaped with a few cuts and scratches. The Colt, a wreck, was left there, as it landed, an unsettling welcome for new visitors to Selebi-Phikwe. After many months, Grandpa finally got round to towing it away, with the intention of repairing the battered fuselage and wings. He never did. The day we arrived in Botswana, the little aeroplane lay under the thorn tree in a sorer state than it had been in, all those years ago, when a bruised and bewildered Jonathan had crawled out.

Scattered around the wreck stood another small shed, an empty kraal with a ramp for loading cattle and two lopsided caravans—the same caravans that Grandpa Ivor had lived in, decades earlier, in his first bush camps. A short distance away was one other house: a small, squat building, its walls barely recognisable as once white, its broken windows gaping forlornly. A little further away, hidden by a clump of trees from the main houses, was an even

smaller, equally neglected old building where Grandpa said his staff sometimes stayed.

Encircling the houses, caravans, sheds, and plane was a rickety barbed wire boundary fence. Beyond this, in every direction, was bush, stretching endlessly and almost uniformly until it became sky at some faraway point on the flat horizon, interrupted only by a few distant purple hills.

That was all.

The only reminder that anyone else still even existed was a railway track that ran parallel to the fence behind Grandpa's house. Every few hours, passing close enough to rattle the kitchen windows and suspend all conversation, an old black steam train chugged along the line. If the driver saw us waving, he'd wave back, a loud hoot piercing the din of the passing ore-piled carriages. Then the train would rattle out of sight, the lone man in the caboose shrinking to a blur, and the bush's gentle noises resurfacing.

After sunset, shadowy figures shovelling coal into the flames twisted and straightened across the red glow of the furnace.

That train was to become a beloved part of our Botswana.

The deafening clatter, the black smoke streaming into bright blue sky, the flame-lit passage across the darkness—sounds that would become as comforting as the calls of dawn francolins, dusk owls, and the ever-tinkling cowbells, an occasional dramatic presence that, like the poisonous creatures that slithered, crouched, and scuttled everywhere, would soon be utterly natural and reassuring.

That was later, though. Come nightfall on our first day, the lingering image of the furnace only deepened the sense of wondrous danger, of a surreal place in which the strange and the fierce had collided, oddly, where barely believable reality slid effortlessly into the imaginary.

After dinner, gazing into the lamplight shadows, I tried to follow the conversation. Then I wondered where the scorpion had got to, and whether it was alone, and the voices receded as I conjured deadly creatures beneath every shadow. Soon, I was as far away as Lulu and Damien, who slept on the sofa beside me.

GRANDPA'S VISITORS

Even a discussion about Dad's uncertain new career, I only just managed to follow.

Dad had never enjoyed being a doctor, and he'd come to Botswana to stop, once and for all, being one.

"What you going to do?" I'd nagged, repeatedly, as we packed up in New Zealand.

"Who knows, Robbie. Farm something, maybe. Start a business. I'll cross that dry riverbed when I come to it..."

Then, I'd been obsessed by the possibilities and uncertainties. Now, they were nothing to what might lie beneath the furniture, let alone beyond. By midnight, when we traipsed outside, under the aeroplane wings, to see the stars, my head was swirling with a menagerie of perils. Of the conversation, all I remembered was Grandpa: he and his flight, plight, fright stories the only equal match for the absorbing wonders of his world.

"Bloody terrible what happened to old Meyer. Did ya hear about that?"

"Who's Meyer?" asked Dad.

"Ya dunno who Meyer is?" Grandpa raised his palms dramatically. "Ya bloody out of touch, Keith. The famous flying doctor... the man was a living legend... maids to ministers, every Motswana loved Meyer."

But just months earlier, as we were packing up our house, and Dad was happily closing his practice in Auckland, Dr. Meyer had died. Botswana had been shaken. "Bloody incredible, Keith. In the papers, on the radio. National mourning for the poor old bugger."

On the day Meyer died, a thick blanket of winter mist had shrouded Tonota village.

"He was crazy to try and land," said Grandpa, shaking his head. "Dunno what got into him."

I'd tried to imagine clouds that could make Grandpa think a landing crazy.

That morning, when Grandpa had collected us in Johannesburg, he'd used orange hay-bale twine to secure the door. Having

T W E N T Y C H I C K E N S F O R A S A D D L E

blithely dismissed questions about the daylight streaming through a gap between the door and the fuselage, he'd climbed into the front and announced calmly that the little plane was overloaded. Just so we didn't worry if we came rather close to the end of the runway before takeoff.

I couldn't imagine such clouds. I could barely imagine there ever being any clouds at all in the brilliant blue sky we'd arrived in that afternoon.

Nor did clouds seem any more possible as we stood outside that night and stared up at the brilliant sky. Nothing lay between us and the vast sparkling dome, and above the bush, the stars, like the sun before them, shone impossibly bold and bright.

