



# Magic

## There is a Land of Oz

*The dream child moving through a land  
Of wonders wild and new*

*Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland*

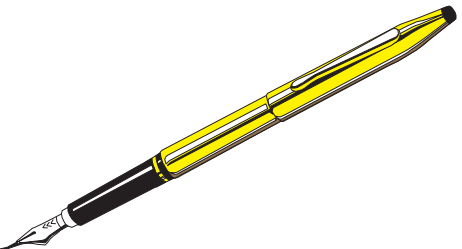
I never met a Cheshire Cat or the Queen of Hearts on my travels, but after a month in Zimbabwe I felt Alice in Wonderland had nothing on me.

I'd already been on the road for four months by then, and maybe lengthy, solitary musings easily led to a fanciful turn of mind. Or maybe it was simply the Spell of Africa at work, but in Zimbabwe I felt as if I had a lead role in a slightly bizarre stage play.

Actually, the sequence of curious events began on an Australian train where I met Lady Knox, a sprightly octogenarian, wife of a deceased parliamentarian and fervently British though she hadn't set foot in Mother England since World War I. Nabbing me in the aisle as I passed, she said, "Go and get us a gin and tonic, will you dear." I did, and we became fast friends between Adelaide and Perth.

When I told Lady Knox my travel plan included Zimbabwe, she insisted I call on her granddaughter, Jass, in Harare and pass on her regards.

As the White Rabbit led Alice down the rabbit hole, Lady Knox led me to Jass who led me to Christmas festivities at John and Didi's house. As parties go, tea at the Mad Hatter's was unbeatably outlandish, but drinks with Didi and friends came close.



"Oh no! I couldn't possibly intrude at Christmas." I protested.

"Nonsense!" said Didi. "We're 13 now and I've been dreading it. You'll make 14. Come along now, it's all arranged. We'll play tennis."

"I'm afraid I don't play tennis."

"That doesn't matter," replied Didi. "We won't play either. It's bound to rain."

"Oh, I see..." but I didn't quite.

The rambling old farm house, an assemblage of jutting parts and angles, numerous rooms with high ceilings, dark timber, rock, brick and flagstone fireplaces, was a grand if somewhat creaky relic of early colonial Rhodesia. Didi's grandfather had settled in those parts in the 1890's along with the Cecil Rhodes crowd.

A black and white, gray-whiskered terrier greeted my arrival, bouncing wildly in circles around me. "Get down Peppi!" yelled Didi, whom I recall as looking perky and pink, dressed as she was in pink blouse, pink slacks and pink sneakers. Didi knows her place in the world, likes it just fine, welcomes you into it, and you must take her as you find her.

Despite orders Peppi could not restrain his bouncing, and we followed exuberantly behind Didi through the airy center of the house. In the back garden two enormous black labs waggled toward me with snuffly snouts and thrashing tails intent on outdoing Peppi the terrier.

"Satchmo! You wretched beast," yelled Didi at the big male then turned to consider the tennis court, which she pronounced unfit for play. Why I didn't ask because I was busily engaged in passionate embrace with Satchmo who had seized the moment to leap. With big, mud-reddened paws around my neck he lapped my face with slurpy kisses.

"Satchmo!" shrieked Didi. "Oh dear me! Diane, you must take those muddied things off and we'll put them in the washer."

Fortunately, I like animals and pooh-poohed this suggestion. Summoning up my best manners, I brushed the incident aside, saying, "They'll wash later. Don't worry. As long your friends won't think me strange."

"Good heavens, no," laughed Didi. "Everyone who comes here knows they have to put up with dogs."

With that, and as tennis was not on, we moved to a side garden to sip gin under a brilliantly red, flowering flamboyant tree while waiting for the other guests. A flock of large white geese arrived first.

Satchmo and the geese began a game of tag. The geese fluttered and hissed as Satchmo pranced round and round, keeping just out of reach. Several portly, feather-footed chickens strutted pompously in and out of the fray, adding a staccato clucking to the hubbub. The female lab watched demurely from the sidelines, and a half-dozen multi-colored cats observed with yawning disdain from various heights, under chairs, on the backs of lounges, up in tree limbs.

Didi's husband John joined us. He was a good looking man of 70, jolly in that "by-Jove" British sort of way. Fond of a joke and just as happy to be the butt of one, his hearty, infectious laughter always ended with a complementary wheeze. Born to the minor British aristocracy, he went into the army as was customary back then. Stationed in Africa, he settled there after his stint.

Didi, trim, vivacious and witty, is John's third wife and more than 20 years his junior. John is Didi's second husband.

While I heard this family history, partners of earlier matrimonial alliances gradually joined the party.

There was Gren, whose first wife, Diane, had run off with Didi's first husband whose name I forget.

There was John's former (second) wife Jean who had run off with some chap who had six children. Something, I forget what, happened to him and Jean had been left with his six children plus two of her own by John.

In the meantime, John and Jean divorced and John married Didi.

Gren then considered marrying Jean but, deterred by the idea of being saddled with eight kids, he decided to marry someone else. That marriage also floundered. Then Gren finally saw the light and married Jean despite all those kids.

And here they were with assorted offspring sharing Christmas cheer with me and taking much delight in befuddling me with their confusing tales of cross-connubial connections. Sly winks and behind-the-hand asides embellished their stories with innuendo. If painful memories still burned within they were outwardly extinguished by laughter. Their collective motto seemed to be that life is a funny hoax, and you might as well laugh at it as cry over it.

As afternoon wore on, hair-raising accounts of escapades with lions, crocodiles and native uprisings replaced familial topics. Meanwhile, Baby Emma, two weeks old, was thought to be sleeping

peacefully on a spare bed. However, when her mother, Bridgette (product of John and Jean) went to check, Emma was found to be wide awake. Showing every sign of adapting quickly to her eccentric family, she was cooing contentedly and not a bit perturbed to be in the company of many, many fleas.

The flea-carrying culprit had vanished the scene and could not easily be detected as fleas are perfectly natural and plentiful during rainy season in Africa. General speculation shared the opinion that of the three dogs and six cats, Satchmo wore the guiltiest look. Then again it was noted that a goose or two had not lately been seen among the flock.

As if these events were not enough to warrant a most memorable Christmas, the clincher came with Satchmo bearing two gifts for me – much to my astonishment. The first was a box of chocolates from Didi and John. The second was a tube of “Travel Suds” from Satchmo along with a note apologizing for his over-exuberant greeting.

While this Christmas spent in Africa will ever rank high on my list of really special days, it was just one among several curious experiences I enjoyed during my stay in Harare. Others included a close encounter with a lioness in heat, a too-close encounter with an ecstatic group of born-again Christians, a spectral visit from a lone bag-piper playing *Auld Lang Syne* under my window on New Year’s Eve, and an extraordinary day-trip in the company of a Russian-trained undercover policeman named Rex and his friend named Giff who said he had already met me – in a dream.

But these are stories for another time. Now, I must get on with my African safari.

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

*Safety Tips*

*Social Issues, Words for Women*

## Steam Train to Victoria Falls

I was in Harare, planning my first solo African safari, and my Zimbabwean acquaintances could not understand why I wanted to ride an aged steam train to Victoria Falls. “That filthy old thing! It’s slower than a balking mule and twice as crotchety. Take you all night. Why don’t you fly?”

I didn’t want to fly. I wanted the Africa of my daydreams. In my Africa people and places remained untouched by progress. Chugging along in a puffer-billy train fit the image perfectly. That’s why I joined the raucous throng of travelers and well-wishers crowding the platform at Bulawayo rail station. The exuberant clamor grew as I strolled down the line from First-class past Second, Third and finally to the Fourth class coaches, which were absolutely jammed with men, women and children packed onto rough wooden seats. But judging from the laughter and joking going on, they didn’t mind the primitive conditions one bit.

When the old steamer rolled out shortly after 7pm, it whistled and tooted, whooshed and hissed just as I imagined an African train ought to do. Darkness soon followed. I opened the compartment window and hung out listening to the chirping of night creatures. Enveloped in star-spangled, velvety black, the train went chuga-chuga, chuga-chuga down the track, and I thrilled to the romance of it all.

The 450-km rail trip would take 12 hours because the schedule allowed for many stops along the way; that circumstance I expected. The lurching and screeching of wheels as we came to a wheezing halt also struck me as quaintly fitting for the occasion. I thought it novel and amusing to watch as the scores of passengers scrambled off the train at a rural outpost consisting of little more than a hut. Where did they go? The blackness seemed devoid of human habitation. That novelty soon wore thin, however, as a party of unwelcome stowaways boarded simultaneously with the departing passengers. At each stop hordes of flying insects flapped in my open window. The trouble was my window jammed. I could not get it closed and couldn’t find a steward to lend a hand.

Finally I gave up trying and escaped head and all into my bedroll. To get a whiff of fresh air I’d contrive to make a slit in the bedding just big enough to poke my nose out quickly before an assortment of moths and beetles could use it for a landing perch.

Around 4am I emerged from my cocoon and realized the insects had disappeared with the rising sun. But now, as I groped my way from undercover, everything I touched felt gritty. What the . . . ? Bingo! Steam engines eat coal and belch ash and cinders out the stack – in this case straight down

the line into my open window, all night long. Ash had seeped everywhere. My shoes and clothes were layered with soot. My scalp felt lumpy. My eyes, throat and nose felt dry and scratchy.

Dive-bombing insects. Head full of cinders. My Harare friends were right about that train. It was a filthy old thing. But! my romantic vision of Africa was intact.

Cinders, well, they wash off. And being awake at dawn was timely for catching fleeting glimpses of unfettered wildlife parading near the track. By the time the train pulled into Victoria Falls Station just after 9am – two hours late – I had enjoyed a railside view of a warthog family, antelope in twos and threes, several troupes of baboons, and flocks of vultures wheeling high in the sky or hunched on poles.

The morning was fresh, clear and mild. At that time of day Victoria Falls village presented few outward signs of its famous attraction, except for a persistent, low, rumbling sound as if a thunderstorm were assembling somewhere in the distance.

Yes, I thought, here is Africa. No city noise. No glitzy neon. No groomed parklands. Just a campsite, a few shops and a scattering of hotels.

I rented a cottage at the nearby rest camp, showered and ate breakfast before going in search of *Mosi-oo-Tunya* - The Smoke That Thunders. This is the spot where the Zambezi river, nearly two kilometers in width, plunges into a 108 meter deep chasm.

Aimed for the floating mist rising in smoke-like puffs on the horizon, I followed a pathway through mixed woodland, meeting along the way an uninterested baboon or two, a bobbing guinea fowl, a skittering lizard and an abundance of butterflies. The incessant rumbling intensified like a deep, sonorous drum roll as I entered the mist-nurtured forest edging the periphery of the chasm. Within this cool, green inner sanctum, peace and serenity prevailed. A gentle rustle and a flicker of movement, a small doe-eyed creature, probably a gazelle, interrupted grazing to glance at me inquiringly, her nose and ears a-twitch. No harm here she decided and resumed her delicate browsing.

Intertwining pathways led to several different lookout points, and I was inevitably drawn to Danger Point where the river flows tumultuously into the captivating embrace of an ever deepening and widening yet unyielding gorge.

Missionary explorer Dr David Livingstone is credited with being the first white man to set eyes, in 1855, on the Falls. Said not to have been a man of whimsy, Livingstone was, nevertheless, moved to

note poetically, "On sights as beautiful as this angels in their flight must have gazed." I knew exactly what he meant. For a close encounter with nature's forces both benign and formidable, Victoria Falls cannot be beat. Even the most pragmatic soul could not help making cosmic connections in such a setting.

The churning torrent below diffused skyward in a vaporous blue backdrop for multi iridescent rainbows. In blissful solitude I sat safely stretched out on a rocky outcropping overlooking the thundering cataract, arms and head thrown back to absorb the warming rays of sunshine. Thankfully I had the place to my self for a short time. With no intrusions on my thoughts save the sound of the river rushing, I had no trouble at all imagining those rainbows as a stairway to heaven.

A pretty good first safari, Africa. What else have you in store?

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

*Alone*

## Strangers

To me it's a marvel explicable only in terms of karmic ties, how the paths of two human beings from totally different backgrounds suddenly converge thousands of miles from home. For a few hours, maybe a few days, their lives intertwine in a single story like threads in a tapestry. Then, as if the pattern is complete and the threads snipped, they depart in opposite directions, never to meet again. What remains is only a memory that fades in time or flourishes in fantasy. I do not know if Peter remembers me. But I remember Peter.

I remember walking toward the Victoria Falls Hotel expecting to dine alone as usual. I remember the train station, walking the platform and footsteps overtaking me from behind. Like all women walking alone in unfamiliar territory, I was alert to possible danger, my hand clutched tightly to the money belt at my waist. Then I remember relaxing and falling into friendly conversation with the tall, fair-haired New Zealander whose stride met mine and who, as fate would have it, also expected to eat alone.

Instead, we ate together, Peter and I, outdoors on the terrace of the Victoria Falls Hotel. A constant low, rumbling reverberated from the river in the distance. Sounds of singing insects mingled with a tinkling marimba rhythm, and dainty breezes carried garden scents to our table. Starshine flickered in Peter's eyes, and I thought they were the bluest eyes I had ever seen.

Magic must have been afoot that night, otherwise, I cannot explain why I stepped so totally out of character the next day. I had planned to follow the typical tourist route back to Harare with stopovers at Hwange National Park and Lake Kariba. On a whim I switched to Peter's plan and went hitchhiking, a form of transportation I normally disdain as tedious at best and downright dangerous at worst.

Peter had his heart set on seeing Botswana's Okavango Delta, a 15,000 sq km inland maze of lagoons, channels and islands teeming with African wildlife. Chances of getting there were slim. Road conditions were iffy in January with the onset of rainy season. We had no tent, no food, and meager finances nixed joining an organized safari or renting a vehicle. I hadn't the proper clothing or footwear, not even a backpack, only a small suitcase easy to handle for short distances but hardly the gear for hitchhiking.

I must have been bewitched. I didn't even need persuading. I actually asked to go along. And Peter was game to have me, although I suspect he had second thoughts when I started down the road to Kazungula pulling a squeaky-wheeled suitcase behind me.

Two kilometers from town we stopped at the main junction and waited for a lift under the shade of a large tree. Still beguiled by the spirit of adventure and using my suitcase as a backrest, I cheerfully sat and listened to the sounds of drums and chanting wafting from some nearby unseen village. Africa called, but two hours at the side of the road brought us no closer to the Okavango Delta. Only three vehicles had passed. The first stopped and picked up a local group of wayfarers headed for Namibia. The second, an army truck going in the wrong direction, pulled up, and its driver offered us a drink of water. The third whizzed right on by.

Just as we decided it was time to lift our numb bums and retreat toward Victoria Falls, a pick-up truck rumbled into view and stopped in response to our enthusiastic shouting and waving. Its occupants – a Brit named Dave and two Australians, Kathy and Jenny – decided we weren't dangerous lunatics and said "hop aboard." Only "aboard" meant squeezing in between the camping gear stowed in the back.

Riding in the back of a pick-up truck, scrunched between boxes, poles and tarpaulins is as uncomfortable as it sounds, and it doesn't do much for your hairdo either. As for the complexion, burnt red isn't becoming if you ask me, but Peter beamed his wonderful grin and yelled over the roaring wind, "You look great!" That was all I needed to calm any residual misgivings.

That night we stayed in a campsite by the Zambezi River. A fantastic lightning and thunder storm hit, but we were cosy in a tiny rented camper and, together with our new companions, we shared supper, a bottle of brandy, and lots of travel tales. Dave and Kathy were contract teachers heading home to Botswana after a camping trip in Zimbabwe. Jenny was just out from Australia getting a feel for the teacher's life in Africa. Peter was betwixt and between continuing medical studies, or taking a volunteer post in Tonga. And I was having the adventure of my life.

The next day the teachers dropped us off at a place called Nata Lodge about 270 km into Botswana and near the junction for Okavango Delta. As it turned out, road conditions kept us from reaching Okavango. That was a disappointment, but we did cover quite a bit of territory between Victoria Falls and Francistown, Botswana before circling back to Zimbabwe via Bulawayo.

In our four days together, Peter and I grumbled a little and laughed a lot. We got sunburned, wind-blown, rain drenched, and we argued about who had the better hitchhiking technique. We saw elephants browsing on the veldt and imagined we heard lions calling one another at night. We talked local politics with Africans under the shade of roadside trees and witnessed other "only in Africa" peculiarities, like the mysterious smoking tree. That happened in Francistown while Peter was off scouting out bus and train departures, and I remained on baggage guard. Before my eyes a tree

across the street suddenly began to smoke – no flames just a distinctively smoke-like substance coiled up from a juncture of limbs. A hubbub ensued, the local fire brigade arrived, the tree was doused, everybody went about their business, and I was none the wiser.

The last image I have of Peter was seeing him off at the bus station in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. We waved goodbye, wished one another a fond farewell, and I've never heard of him since. I never miss him, but I won't ever forget him.

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

*Safety Tips*

*Social Issues*

*Alone*