

A Howl of Delight

from Ibo by Tom Bullough

Sitting in a dingy café on the Mozambican side of the border, Eric and I toasted our success with four beers and two slabs of meat. The place had a hard earth floor and a couple of gas lamps on the walls, and it was built like cloisters around the edges of a bare muddy rectangle where a few plastic chairs and tables were being flagellated by the rain. In the walls were the small barred windows of rooms where you could stay if you were careless enough to arrive at the border three minutes late, and by the look of the woman who had settled on the table beside us, her frilly pink nylon blouse and badly-bleached hair, the options for the night were not restricted to sleeping.

So far, the principal differences between Malawi and Mozambique were the total disintegration of the road into a mud track, the onset of a fire-storm, the cessation of all electricity, the collapse of most of the buildings and the respelling of Mulanje as Milange.

“Renamo were based here in the late ‘80s,” Eric explained, as we climbed back into the Land Rover, where he opened yet another beer and instructed me to roll a joint. “The rebel guerrillas... That’s why the place is so fucked. They smashed up everything except the church and the rectory, for some reason. They went through the hospital with mattocks, hacking up the beds and murdering the patients, pregnant mothers... They systematically smashed every tile in the place. The tiles on the walls, the tiles on the floors...”

Insofar as it was a road at all, the road in front of us was narrow, its edges falling away into the thick, dark forest and its surface riven with channels and crevasses. Through the smoke, the whining wipers and the marijuana smoke, the rain had become a wall of luminous strands, while every few seconds the world came blindingly alight, a delta of lightning stretching across the water-torn sky, the thunder rarely more than a second or two behind it, shivering upwards through the seats and the suspension.

“I used to be in the South African army,” Eric continued, after a mile or two. “Years ago, when the war was still going on up here... I mean, it was never a war really, it was just these fuck-ups charging about the place, killing everyone, but we South Africans were backing the fuck-ups. The Mozambican

government, Frelimo, was boycotting South Africa over apartheid, you see. So, I was up here quite a lot, all in all..."

"Were you fighting?" I asked.

"Nah," Eric steered round yet another pothole. "Not really. I was more into espionage, that kind of thing. But I was in the army for about eight years, and I came up across that border so many times I can't even tell you. Mostly near Swaziland in the south. We'd have to go and meet informers and have these fucked-up meetings where it's you and some paranoid freak in a hut somewhere... That shit was hard, I'm telling you." He drained his beer and dropped the can on the floor. "Really. Sometimes, you'd get a guy who's losing it so badly he's got his gun to your head, you know, screaming he's going to kill you, and the only thing you could do was start laughing. That was the only way to defuse the situation. You'd just have to sit there and go, 'You dumb fuck! You think that if I wanted to kill you, then I wouldn't just kill you like that?!'"

For a moment, Eric slowed the Land Rover, allowing the rain to edge back towards the vertical, inspecting an opening in the trees on the left-hand side, then he clicked his tongue and drove on.

"That was one way to deal with them," he continued. "But you'd be wired, I tell you. Sometimes, when things got really out of hand, the only thing to do was to pull out your knife..." Reaching beneath the seat, he produced a ten-inch sheath knife, revolving it in his hand. "Then you'd drive that fucker right into your arm. When it was life or death, you know? You'd pretty much pin your own fucking arm to the table and just sit there with blood going everywhere, laughing... That would really freak them out!"

"Surely..." I said.

"Well," he said. "There's a way you can do it, so you don't cut the arteries or anything, but... Well. It hurts like fuck."

Slowing again, Eric peered into a hole in the trees, then steered straight into it, and as he did so the rain lapsed immediately – a track stretching in front of us, smooth and straight, the trees skeletal in every direction, their bare branches covered with white-faced owls.

"God," Eric shook his head. "Mozambicans sure know how to kill off their trees."

"What's up here?" I asked.

"Oh, I've done that other track every time I've ever been up here." He pulled an atlas from the side of his seat and tossed it onto my lap. "There's a short-cut this way. Someone was telling me about it the other day. Takes you to Gurúè, so you cut out the loop south by Mocuba."

“Looks a bit thin,” I said, digging out a lighter and inspecting the spidery red line working its way north from somewhere depressingly close to Milange.

“Well, it’s hardly going to be worse than the other one, is it?” said Eric.

He opened the cool box, pulled out two more beers and pushed one into my hands. Although I hadn’t been counting, we had, since leaving Blantyre, consumed at least twenty cans between us, as well as two pure joints of Malawi Gold, and I was beginning to wonder whether, if called upon, I would actually have been able to walk, far less navigate a vehicle.

“I might just sit this round out,” I said, putting the beer back in the cool box. “If it’s all the same to you.”

“Drink the fucking beer!” Eric growled, after a moment.

“Um...” I said, uncertainly. “Okay... So, how come you left the army, then? What happened there?”

“Huh,” Eric grunted and replaced his cigarette. “Well... Seven or eight years ago, we were coming up over the border at Ponta d’Ouro, in the south. Me and seven other guys. We were supposed to have been meeting these Renamo informers, but it was raining and we lost our bearings. So, we wound up crossing back over the border by accident. We were all blacked up, you know, camouflaged, and we ran into a South African border patrol who took us for Mozambicans and opened up with an SS-77... So there we were, on the ground, screaming that we were South Africans, you know, but they just kept firing and all the others were having the shit blown out of them, until in the end there was only me and this corporal left.”

“Fuck,” I said.

“Fuck,” Eric agreed. He finished his can and added it to the heap on the floor. “That was a bad evening, I’m telling you. The cunts on the border realised what was happening in the end and they brought in a chopper, but, you know, the job was done... So, when we got back me and this corporal went out and got drunk on whisky. And this corporal, he was needing to talk, you know what I mean? He was talking about the war, about what it was really all about, and I had no clue back then, you know, I was a good South African boy, all flag and country. He told me how the Russians were supplying the Frelimo government and how they had these factory trawlers working off the coast, filling up with fish, prawns, just raping the coastline. He talked about Renamo, how there were these American idiots who figured they were capitalists because the government was nominally Marxist, and they were supplying them with weapons, even though by that time they’d killed, like, a million people. They’d been charging through the forest on motorbikes for fifteen years, brutalised in ways you

couldn't even imagine, attacking villages, making kids torch their families in their huts... I swear to God, I had no idea! I couldn't even believe it! I mean, none of us fucking knew! So, the next morning, I went to the CO and told him I'd had enough, and a few weeks later, when I'd sobered up a bit, I figured I'd get into forestry conservation, see if I couldn't square things up with the world a bit."

As Eric was talking, the track had begun to wind downhill, its surface thick with stones and mudslides, the slope coming close to thirty degrees and the headlights scouring a river some way beneath us, piles of white gathered round a few scattered rocks, the trailer pushing down on top of us so that when Eric touched the brakes we slithered out of control, and, in the end, the only thing to do was to remain in the lowest gear possible, watching as the torrent at the bottom began to reveal itself: sleek and swollen, branches flashing past us like the arms of drowning men.

The banks of the river were ragged bedrock, and we managed to stop about two yards away from the water. In front of us, the headlights caught foaming eddies and a wall of fleshy-leafed trees where some sort of feverish activity was underway. Scores of naked people were sliding among the trunks and the branches, craning over one another to gawp at us.

"Fuckers!" Eric shouted.

"That's people!" I said.

"Of course it's fucking people!" said Eric. He looked at the slope behind us, which the Land Rover would never have climbed, even if we had managed to turn round. "It's always the same! Every time you build a bridge, the fucking people steal it!"

To our right, as I had somehow failed to notice, a single steel girder was stretching between the banks, its ends sunk firmly in concrete foundations. In the trees, more and more people were joining the crowd, hiding among the foliage, the headlights glancing from the contours of their limbs, their teeth and the whites of their eyes, and this seemed to madden Eric beyond measure as he took his carton of cigarette packets from the seat beside him, pressed it into my hands, finished his beer, then gunned the engine and accelerated into the river.

At once, water was pouring through the windows. The headlights vanished and, by the light of his cigarette, Eric's face looked so demonic that he might very well have wanted to get to the other side simply to exact some horrible revenge. The water swirled round our chests, the beer cans circled the cab like a family of ducks and vanished from the right-hand window, and among the dizzying, dope-induced patterns the trailer began to succumb to the

current, the motorbike turning, the wheels of the Land Rover slipping until, as the headlights finally burst back into the air, capturing panic in the bushes, figures stampeding in every direction, we lost traction altogether and the water sank back towards our thighs.

“Cigarette,” said Eric, collecting the cartons from the ceiling where I had been holding them, ripping open a packet and lighting a new one. “Beer.”

“Eric, I don’t...”

“Shut the fuck up!” He reached into the cool box, took two cans and sat one in my lap, watching me closely as I took a few swigs. “Right. You are now going to get hold of the winch cable, jump onto the bank and attach it to the biggest thing you can reach. Preferably a tree.”

“Alright,” I muttered. “Whatever you fucking say.”

Climbing from the window, it was all I could do not to fall into the river. My head was swimming, the wet metal slippery beneath my feet, and by the time that I had managed to pull myself together, to lie facedown on the bonnet and fumble for the winch in the churning water, Eric was already shouting and hammering his knife against the windscreen.

As I landed on the bank, the reaction in the bushes was one of absolute stillness. Despite the glare of the headlights, everybody seemed convinced that so long as they remained exactly as they were we could have no idea of their existence, and so they remained as I proceeded haltingly up the slope, dragging the cable behind me, passing the occasional foot, a shining stretch of stomach, a nipple, a simple spear, a pair of eyes peering with unconcealed terror from the space between two branches. And when a baby cried, there was a slap and the silence seemed to deepen even further.

Reaching a small tree, I passed the cable twice round the trunk, close to the ground, expecting every time to encounter a hand or an ankle. I clipped the cable back onto itself and signalled to Eric, watching as the Land Rover prised itself up onto the bank, the tree groaning beside me, water pouring from the cracks around the doors, the crowd apparently not so much as breathing.

“Good,” said Eric, as I got back into the cab. He opened another beer, took a deep breath and emptied it down his throat. “Okay...” He belched. “Now, go and sit this can in front of that bush there, on the ground. Then come back, sit down and shut the fuck up.”

Without a word, I did as he instructed, and the two of us sat in silence until, after a minute or two, a bare brown arm uncoiled itself from the bush, took the can gently between its fingers and sucked it back among the leaves.

Apart from the river and the hiss of the forest, for a time there was nothing to hear, nothing to see but the occasional drops of water dissolving into showers of sparks. But Eric kept his finger pressed to his lips, staring into the dripping darkness, so I continued to inspect the shapes of the leaves and the branches around our little pool of light.

Then, about a hundred yards away, somebody screamed. You could hear their feet stamping in the dark, sodden forest, their voice rising into a long, wild howl of delight.

“There!” said Eric, with satisfaction. He slid the Land Rover back into gear. “Now he’s got something to put his water in.”