

ROAR

OF THE



LION HEAD CANE

HOWIE WILSON

**ROAR
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LION HEAD CANE**

A Story of African Magic

By
Howie Wilson



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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Africa and its magical people; to my father, who had a dream; and to my mother, who inspired mine.

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Many people have contributed to this book of fiction whose core essence is lived reality. It is impossible to thank them all. However those colleagues, friends and family members who recognize the reflection on their experiences I most sincerely thank and hope that this fictionalization is not offensive.

As always in an undertaking of this type there are several whose inputs are so critical that the book could not be written without their help. Foremost I want to thank one of my sons, Litos, whose life provided the loose framework around which this story was built. Equally important has been my sister, Pat, who helped translate with laughter my rather personalized expression of English into a form more accessible to others. Finally, I wish to express my deep gratitude to my other son, Zak, my parents and other siblings and dear friends who are continuously supportive of my efforts.

PROLOGUE

“Alright I’ll start now. I said I would and I will. Just stop staring at me that way!”

“Are you okay?”, Izzi asks looking into my study where I sit like a monumental slab of blah in front of my inert computer. He takes a quick look at my ornery face suffused with frustration, then glances over to the lion head cane.

“Behave yourself cane!” he scolds wagging his finger at it. “So what’s the big problem now?” he asks me.

“Where do I start?” I have a degrading whine in my voice which further irritates me and which thankfully Izzi tactfully ignores.

“It really doesn’t matter does it. The doctor said you needed to keep your mind busy while your body heals, and it was you that decided you wanted to write about it.”

“I know what the doctor said, and I know the psycho-babble he pumps out. But I have to have a framework otherwise it won’t work.”

“Well then just start at the beginning.”

“What beginning?” I respond like a petulant child.

“Your beginning I guess.” Giggling with a conspiratorial wink towards the cane Izzi leaves me to stew. Writing this story is not his idea, it’s mine, mine and the lion head cane’s. And furthermore I am totally aware that I have lost at least some of my marbles, having made a commitment to this damnable cane to write this story – its story - Roar of the Lion Head Cane. It’s a story of African magic. It is Izzi’s story.

“But where do I start?” Again I perserverate to myself in utter anguish for the umpteenth time.

“Just start!” growls the cane menacingly.

I sigh as I place my hands over the keyboard, closing my eyes and beseeching inspiration. “I guess it all began with the birth, but I wasn’t there, I must have been in M’kushi. I wonder if it was that night when Smiler....”

First there is a tingle, then a shiver followed by a frenetic rush – the story starts to spill out just like magic! It takes all my concentration just to keep up with the narration that has taken possession of my fingers as they madly dance over the keys.

Distantly, abstractly, I hear the cane roar.

MY INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN MAGIC

Heavy nasal breathing shatters my sleep; my eyes burst open to an intense blackness. I can see nothing, but my other senses of touch, smell, and especially sound, are heightened.

Instantly, without the usual sense of dislocation, I realize that I am lying on my cot facing the bedroom wall of my small bungalow in rural Africa. I also realize that someone is in my bedroom with me - uninvited. The purr of mucous-laden breathing is magnified by my fear, as is the slightly acrid musky smell that I associate with African males. Panic seizes me. Am I about to be murdered, robbed?

As rapidly as the emotional wave comes, it passes. I feel a survival-stimulated calm with a corresponding deepening of my own breathing. My muscles tense and I spring, twisting simultaneously. My hands instinctively find and clasp around the neck that is bending over me. I throw the body to the ground and land on top, pinning it down. There is no resistance. The body below me lies inert. My senses have cued me correctly - it is male.

I reach for a match from the box that I keep on the bedside table and strike it. Below me is the face of a black boy-man with vacant eyes - the village idiot - Smiler. The match goes out.

Tension drains away as I quickly roll off his passive body. Smiler is considered harmless. He is a young, pre-verbal aged boy trapped in the body of a muscular youth. I find another match. Smiler, with his characteristic inane grin, continues to look at me vacuously. He is filthy, wearing nothing other than the shirt that I had discarded by the bed before lying down. He has been foraging for clothes.

"Dammit Smiler!" I curse. He cringes from my anger. The second match goes out.

With a third match lit, I find him a pair of shorts, help him get them on, then frog-step him out of my bedroom, through the adjoining living room, to the veranda door that he has left open. I shove him out. He disappears as his blackness dissolves into the ink-stained night.

I waken with frayed nerves. I need a cigarette, no, a cigarette and a whiskey. Relaxing in my favorite chair my mind returns to my dream - to the time of Smiler's visit to my house in rural Zambia.

After Smiler left I went out onto the veranda and listened to the *toca toca toca* of the drums from the nearby village sounding the heart pulse of the country. The beat soothed me. The rest of the compound was asleep. I could see no kerosene lantern, candle, or flashlight signaling an insomniac.

My mind digested my rude awakening. Smiler had been well known to us in the school's compound. But the realization that he had entered my house had left me with a sense of unease. It was the first time that I had heard of him entering any of the *muzungo's*, the foreigner's, houses. He was reported to be afraid of us, the spirit people with the white skin. Many in the village considered us powerful witch doctors with our material world possessions.

I shivered as the drums reached a crescendo. A night-time hunting bird shrieked as my rational self weakened and my superstitious self gained ascendancy.

My memory triggers the same response in my mind. "Magic is happening again!" I whisper into the darkness.

1: THE ART TRADERS

He was born of magic; he was saved by magic; now it was time to use his magic. He was almost twenty.

Parrot, or Papagaio in the local dialect, is determined to make his fortune, and Maputo is his chosen location to manifest it. For the past few years he has lived relatively free from fear. The state has left him alone since his Uncle Ali's intervention got him out of prison, and Lucia no longer pursues him in the spirit world thanks to Muzimii's magic on the Mueda Plateau. Just to be on the safe side, however, Parrot assiduously avoids anyone carrying a gun or capable of casting the evil eye. He feels liberated. The Papagaio is ready to fly.

He is confident. Being a secondary school graduate is a great qualification as it is still a relatively rare phenomenon in independent Mozambique. Parrot also considers himself streetwise, capable of handling himself in most situations. There are friends and family in Maputo; the extended family system can be activated when needed. Probably his best asset, however, is his youthful exuberance, his general cockiness.

For two years Parrot has scammed, hustled, and played in the country's capital. He has lived the life of young men worldwide - a life full of dreams, schemes and mischief. When he finds a place to stay on the edge of the richest neighborhood, just across from one of the main military installations in Maputo, it does not strike him as even slightly ironic, even though he is supposedly dead according to his military records. A close friend's father is the military compound's head honcho. He knows Papagaio well, and knows also that he is 'officially dead'. This means nothing; it is an accepted fact of life in Mozambique.

Papagaio has also found a buddy of formidable proportions. This friend-for-everything is Segundo. Together they share the room at the back of the compound of a second aunt. They also share food, clothes, girlfriends and eventually studies, having both registered in the technical school for construction.

Segundo, the son of the hereditary Islamic leader of Zambezia, is as close to a penniless playboy as Maputo is able to host during the early days of its second decade of post-independence. These are heavy years. The revolution is breaking down under the onslaught of a multi-year drought and an increasingly powerful guerrilla opposition group called Renamo. Maputo, once Lorenzo Marques, the city of dancing and singing, is in the doldrums; no one dances or sings unless they are fed first.

Everything is scarce, except sex, which is a good thing considering that it is the two youths' main preoccupation. If it wears a skirt, it is of interest. Conquests are made in the open and behind closed doors. Virgins, the forbidden fruits, are too tempting to walk away from. Widows are greatly appreciated, especially if they provide food at the same time. Wives are the most difficult of the harvest, and it has happened more than once that one or the other has performed an emergency exit through a window with shoes and pants in hand while an irate husband is smashing down the bedroom door.

It is also a time of bending the Islamic restrictions on alcohol and tobacco. Fortunately, neither is particularly attracted to these vices. Soccer continues to play a pivotal role in Papagaio's life, and it is the only point of contention between the two cohorts. Segundo likes Costa de Sol, while Papagaio remains a stalwart supporter of the Red Star team. Even this

is no more than a friendly difference, as Segundo really doesn't care. His only sport is sex, whereas for his friend sex can never conquer soccer as the overriding passion.

They work when and where they can. For a while Papagaio secures a good after-school job helping a Japanese company. His gift with languages is his big selling point, along with his innate charm. Papagaio's job is to help these foreigners, who reputedly even eat raw fish, maneuver through Maputo's idiosyncrasies. Most importantly, they require assistance for clearing customs and other bureaucratic dealings. Segundo finds a floor manager's job in his stepbrother's factory.

They complete their year's training in construction management but don't bother to get their certificates. The bribe is too costly to bother. Besides, they both feel they are expert enough. Even though they don't have the right papers, they have falsified ones that serve just as well. They also have the vocabulary down pat. As far as they are concerned they are construction managers just waiting to build.

The only ingredient lacking to get their toe in the door is some hard cash. They begin to search seriously for resources in their free time when they aren't engaged in their main businesses of satisfying the female half of Maputo's population, and in the case of Papagaio, playing soccer.

Serendipitously, they hear of a crazy Canadian who is a 'mark' for African art. They case out the unsuspecting target by watching his office from the café across the street. There is no doubt in their minds; the man is just the break they are looking for. Even before starting their sale, they know they will succeed. They are about to launch themselves as budding entrepreneurs. Maputo's market place has recently cracked open with the economic-political changes, and they are convinced that they, in the emerging 'no rules' environment, are the future crème de la crème of Maputo.

The deal will be sweet.

Lives and destinies begin to cross; fates are joined. The two cohorts arrive at the Canadian's house with two sculptures from the north of the country.

Cooka, my cook-valet-do-whatever man, opens the door. He knows of my weaknesses and probably gives the two young men a conspiratorial wink before asking me if he should show them in. I am in the living room in my favorite spot, in front of the air conditioner keeping cool. The heat of the city is oppressive at this time of year. He brings the two men in and requests that they place the two sculptures by my feet so that I can see them without having to move.

I see the pieces before I see the salesmen. One of the pieces is Maconde, an art form that specializes in twisting, convoluted, and fantastic forms, primarily worked in ebony. The particular piece in front of me is exquisitely crafted. The other is of Macua origin - a sandalwood figurine of a proud, regal-appearing woman. I salivate, instantly coveting the Maconde piece.

Looking up I see a very tall, angular, black young man with a wide set of white teeth stretched across his face. The smile appears to be a perpetual condition. I glance over and see the other man, much shorter, whose head is downcast. Just as I decide he is too shy to look at me directly his eyes dart up and look at me eye to eye, man to man.

An electrical shock runs through my body, which I later interpret as the touch of destiny. It leaves me feeling so disoriented that I am glad that I have remained seated. I feign that it has not occurred; I need time to understand what has hit me. The only other time anything similar had happened was when I met my wife - my now ex-wife. Why it would be repeated with a perfect stranger doesn't fit into any pattern that I understand. I

concentrate my attention on the sculptures while regaining control of my emotions. With a few calming breaths I am able to rid myself of the upsetting impact that the young man has stirred in me; I look up again.

He is a slighter, younger-looking mulatto, semi-hidden behind the other young man, sort of peeking out from the side like a delicate dik-dik, the tiniest of African antelopes. Our eyes meet again. It is fleeting, glancing. This time a jolt of electricity appears to pass through him as well, but it happens so quickly that I immediately question seeing it. Instead I see another great smile. This one is triumphant. He has witnessed the greed that hasn't left my eyes in spite of the emotional shock. I want the statue.

The mulatto edges past his cohort. He is bright and has discerned that the piece that I most want is the Maconde. He casually picks it up off the floor and hands it to me. After giving me some minutes to run my hands over the ebony and admire the craftsmanship even further, he clears his throat, "You like it? A very fine piece! It comes from the north. Both pieces come from there." He hands me the second statue of the warrior-woman and gives me some time to absorb the beauty of this work before he continues, "She is the warrior-queen who led the Macua against the Portuguese. It is sandalwood." He gently lifts the carving from my hands and rubs the wood strenuously, then hands it back. "Smell." The sandalwood smell is rich, far superior to the joss sticks used by my ex-wife in her meditation space.

Everyone knows the agreement is sealed even before the actual negotiations start. I am going to buy both works of art. But business, any business, in Mozambique in its post-colonial, post-revolution phase, is not just normal business. Also, the country has suffered full-on drought and civil war misery. Nothing can be rushed. Each step has to be taken. They have to do their spiel. The pattern is established. The mulatto is the conductor; the black man is the front man; I am the customer.

Cooka appears with soft drinks for the two young men and a whiskey for me. They are seated side-by-side on the couch across from me, squeezed together almost on top of each other, leaving space for at least another two people. We introduce ourselves. The mulatto calls himself Papagaio and the black youth, Segundo. The sales pitch is amateurish, but they seem oblivious of the fact.

Initially I am the mark, but I quickly gain the advantage. It becomes transparent that the boys are desperate for some cash. I know this without asking; they give off the vibe. It is one of the strongest vibes in Mozambique at this time. More importantly, I know the value of the sculptures; I have been buying them since I first traveled to Africa twenty years earlier.

They are too hungry for money and show it. I play the role of being interested but not too much. This is only a tease on my part and I feel badly as I see their energy fall. The two boys are novices, and after my initial bartering I realize that I no longer just want the sculptures, I want to help them. I am not sure why.

I offer them a generous amount, igniting the hunger in their eyes. Before excessive greed can take over, I close the deal. Once we have established the amount we then have to determine how to actually make the payment. As normal I have no cash. It will require a trip to the bank by someone the next day.

The two men don't seem too disappointed and when they realize I have to go to the bank anyway they ask if they can have the payment in foreign dollars rather than in the national currency of metecais. I know that there is a roaring business in the black market for currency and understand their request.

The illegal market is thriving in Mozambique, although it is marginally less treacherous than the one in Angola where in its heyday you could actually purchase a tank. Still,

Maputo's illegal market is risky enough. It is known in the local language as the 'dumba nenge', a phrase that translates into 'run for your life'. If enough police need some cash, and if they get brave enough, they raid the dumba nenge. The result is that all hell breaks loose, and everyone literally runs for his life. If, however, the police are silly enough to go into the market without sufficient backup in both personnel and arms, then it is they who have to run for their lives. I raise my eyebrows and ask if they are really sure. They are, so I agree to get them American dollars. They finish drinking their soft drinks while we munch on Mozambique's delectable cashew nuts, sold locally at dirt-low prices. It is one of the advantages of living in a collapsed economy. About an hour after they arrive they depart. I give them some survival holdover cash and a promise to have their money for them within the next few days. Cooka puts the two sculptures on my sideboard. They are beautiful.

It would be pretentious to suggest that I have any serious premonition about the consequence of this first encounter. I like both of the young men and have responded more strongly than normal to the mulatto called Papagaio, but not more than this. I do not suspect at that time that we will become so intimate that I will consider one of them as family. Nor do I suspect that they are bringing African magic into the heart of my existence. Instead, I plan how to get the money from the bank, pay them, and bid them farewell. It happens all the time.

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