

THE PLAN

Eritrean fighter-bombers blasted Ethiopian villages, a group of rebels tried to assassinate the Egyptian president, and I booked into a bed-and-breakfast in Reading. No matter how comfortable they may be, B&B's are always heavy with an air of bleak isolation. The wizened landlady clutched the money and shuffled back down the corridor, leaving the silence to ring in my ears and me to pick at the cold cooked chicken from Tesco's. I sought solace in the contents of the bookshelf but all that could be found there were faded copies of the *Reader's Digest*, the 1963 edition of *The Observer's Book of Trees* and a selection of pathologically dull volumes, of the sort commonly found at jumble sales, with titles such as *Our Village*.

How had my existence descended to this? My career had been a history of diverse roles that included digging holes in the road for the waterboard, playing guitar, and enduring four years of tedium completing an electronics degree before sidestepping into writing software. I worked under contracts and that meant moving to yet another town every six or twelve months and arriving as a stranger in need of a place to stay. I seemed sentenced to a recurring nightmare of abject solitude in an endless chain of tourist-board commended chambers of chintz. In the subconscious part of my brain, some irritated neurons fired; they strung together some words and then dumped them into the conscious bit. This is what they told me: 'TIME FOR A CHANGE'; I tend to notice little hints like that.

I needed an antidote to the stifling predictability of daily routine and I'd consider any idea that jumped into my head; one did: 'Drive an ice-cream van to Timbuktu'. In my imagination, I pictured the Sahara, vast and majestic, like a scene from the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. And as usual in a world seen through celluloid, there was that invisible hundred-and-twenty-piece orchestra pumping out ninety-decibel melodrama which, apart from miraculously coming from nowhere,

has the uncanny ability to follow film characters wherever they go (perplexingly, though, it's a din that they never seem to notice). Then, the already busy soundtrack found itself competing with the tune *Green Sleeves* rendered in jangling monophonic chimes and in a clashing key. This new melody heralded the appearance of a *Mr Whippy* van trundling over a nearby sand dune and the scene closed as the van blazed off into the distance across the desert piste, throwing back a tail of dust like some surreal land speed-record car while, held high on its roof, like two Olympic torches, were those twin beacons of suburbia: a pair of gigantic glass-reinforced-plastic cornets, each with their mountainous twirl of moulded ice cream, as big as a child's fantasy.

Back in reality though, the journey didn't seem to offer much to see apart from a lot of sand, and I wouldn't even be able to claim that I'd carried those beacons of suburbia to their most unlikely setting since I'd once glimpsed a televised pop-concert in which Madonna sported what looked alarmingly like the soft-whip topping from a pair of Mr Whippy's fibreglass king-cones strapped over her breasts; it was a profound moment of innocence-lost for a cherished childhood symbol as there, under the stark glare of a battery of spotlights, a pair of those luscious spirals of creamy promise were paraded as a pop diva's prosthetic tits.

My line of thought stayed with vehicles and led me to a London taxi – that archaic mass of traditional curves and funereal black paint that's all stiff upper-lips and crustless sandwiches. I took one for an imaginary test-drive across the desert and its upright and formal outline made me think of a starch-collared butler who'd been ordered to serve dinner to a table at the top of one of those hundred-foot high sand dunes by carrying the trays from the bottom: it seemed to wear an expression of dutiful forbearance as if commanded to fulfil a task beneath its dignity. A London taxi would be recognised anywhere and it symbolised the culture that had borne it – and that made it look all the more delightfully out of place as I imagined it bumping along past lions in the Serengeti or gliding across the arched bridge in front of Victoria Falls. Like the butler, it stubbornly clung to the values of a faded era while the rest of the world could only wonder at its obstinate refusal to adapt to changing circumstances – but at least you would feel a reassuring certainty that the occupants of such a car would have remembered to bring the mustard.

The journey would need to be an epic: to the furthest corner of a continent; with that in mind, the words of the title slipped themselves into place: 'Cab to Cape Town'. Those four syllables had such a compelling ring that they seemed to pull into place the ideas I'd been throwing around: like the final piece of a jigsaw, the title knitted the surrounding pieces together and finally revealed the whole picture. I'd found what I'd been looking for.

Okay, so I'd conceived my Big Idea; whether it would work in practice was entirely another question: most of our dreams are annihilated just as soon as the anti-matter of imagination collides with the matter of fact. Selecting a route that would be physically and politically possible presented a choice between war zones, bandits, kidnappers, deserts and dirt tracks – and just as tricky would be the bureaucratic terrain. It was a road that would lead from my bed-and-breakfast existence to where the threats of fighter-bombers and assassination attempts are factors in the quality of everyday life. Even so, I resolved to get the plan underway by giving it some tangible form: I decided to buy a taxi.