The Places That Remember

There is a strange thing that happens when you have spent enough time in the bush. Eventually, you stop seeing certain places as simply places.

A particular tree is no longer just a tree. A waterhole is not simply somewhere animals come to drink. A bend in the road, a rocky koppie or even a patch of grass beside a camp fence can suddenly hold an entire story.

You drive past and almost automatically say, “Remember when…?”

Some of those memories are years old, but the moment you see that landmark again, you are right back there.

One of mine begins at Lower Sabie.

We were camping there a few years ago, and as usual, we were among the first people waiting to leave camp in the morning. We are very much a “be at the gate before it opens” kind of family, so on this occasion there were only two or three vehicles ahead of us. So in short, we were 'late' by our standards.

With a few minutes still to spare, Dad and I decided to stretch our legs and walk towards the newly built tented area. It was summer, which meant an early gate opening, and it was still completely dark.

We were walking along chatting about the day ahead, where we might drive, which roads we should take and, naturally, what we were hoping to see.

Then everything changed.

From somewhere very close by came the unmistakable, deep sawing call of a leopard.

We stopped immediately.

There is something particularly intimidating about hearing a leopard when you cannot actually see it. The fence beside us was fairly overgrown at the time, with long grass and vegetation around it, so there was very little visibility beyond it.

Then we heard the grass moving.

The leopard was walking right beside us, just on the other side of the fence.

Suddenly our casual morning discussion about routes and sightings seemed significantly less important.

We stood completely still and silent while it continued calling and moving through the grass. Every now and then there would be the slightest gap in the vegetation and we would catch a glimpse of movement.

Slowly, it seemed to be heading towards the road and in the direction of Sunset Dam.

Once we were fairly certain it had moved away from us, Dad and I made a rather enthusiastic return to the car.

There were only about five minutes left before the gates opened, but now we knew exactly where we were going.

Straight to Sunset Dam.

When the gate opened, the other vehicles disappeared off in different directions. We drove to the dam and stopped. And waited. That part is important, because sometimes one of the best things you can do on a game drive is absolutely nothing.

Eventually, the leopard appeared.

It crossed exactly where we had hoped it might and came down to drink.

Even now, whenever I think of Sunset Dam, I do not only picture the water, crocodiles, hippos or birds that so often fill the scene. Somewhere in that picture is always that leopard, beginning with a call in the darkness beside the Lower Sabie fence.

Renosterkoppies holds another one of those memories.

One afternoon we had decided to stop there for sundowners when we heard a lioness calling repeatedly.

Eventually she came into view and we noticed that she was suckling. Immediately we wondered whether she had cubs hidden somewhere nearby and whether those calls were meant for them.

Nothing happened that evening, but the thought stuck with us.

So the following morning, instead of following everyone else out of Skukuza in the usual different directions, we headed straight back to Renosterkoppies.

We arrived as the sun was beginning to climb over the waterhole and settled in to wait.

Then, from our right, a male lion appeared, walking down from the base of the koppies towards the water.

We watched him pass and positioned ourselves where we thought we might have a good view.

About ten minutes later, another lion appeared.

This time it was a female.

And bouncing along behind her were four tiny cubs.

They followed her down towards the water, little bodies bobbing through the grass, before eventually drinking and settling with their mother. At one point she lay down and allowed them to suckle, confirming exactly what we had suspected the evening before.

It was one of those mornings that stays with you.

And now, every single time we pass Renosterkoppies, somebody mentions it.

Part of you knows perfectly well that you are unlikely to recreate that exact morning. The same lioness is not going to appear with four cubs simply because you have returned to the place where it happened before.

But you still look.

You still slow down.

You still wonder, just for a moment, whether something might appear.

That is what I love about landmarks in the bush.

Over time, we create our own map on top of the real one. There is the tree where we once saw a leopard. The waterhole where lions appeared. The bend where wild dogs crossed. The patch of grass where something unexpected happened years ago.

To everyone else, they might be ordinary places.

But to us, they are full of stories.

And perhaps that is one of the reasons we keep returning. We are always searching for the next unforgettable sighting, but at the same time, we are constantly driving through the memories of all the ones that came before.