

A NOTE FROM ANITA

By Anita Saunders



A man can achieve a lot in eighty years and then find himself somewhat elevated at the end of it, both in the sense of being looked up to and praised (usually for his wisdom) and also in the sense of being able to survey the landscape of his life from the dignified heights of experience. The level of the viewer is actually not important because it is, after all, a landscape shaped in the mind where the narrowing lines of perspective drive inwards, back into the past, until the vanishing point truly disappears in the time before words — looking back is made difficult because the topography of the past changes whenever a different mood washes over it. But that should not matter. What is seen and how it is seen is private when it comes to memories, though others may guess that a promise of tender green was brushed in over a bleak plain and that a scorched patch was shifted a little further to the right and then more so, almost out of sight. It is only human to make a few adjustments to one's own landscape and, in the past twenty years, many arid areas were turned into very pretty gardens where culture and the cultivated blend harmoniously.

However, there are those, like Stuart, who believe that to change a single detail is to risk throwing the whole scene out of focus. And while it is not in Stuart's nature to dwell on the rough patches of his journey, he will not airbrush any part of it out. To do so would make Stuart uncomfortable and Stuart likes his comfort. That is why he has chosen a comfortable position, wedged into the fork of a baobab tree and with his back resting against the trunk — to wait for the next chapter of his life to begin. It is an entirely appropriate perch for a Grand Counsellor of the Order of the Baobab, silver class.

Baobabs, like elephants, are symbols of Africa. Both are large and long lived and are venerated by those who assume that memory relates to wisdom. This is probably true of all elephants and a few humans but not of baobab trees which do not need to remember where they came from because they grow very very old while remaining in exactly the same spot. There is a baobab tree in Limpopo, South Africa, which has

been carbon dated as being older than 6 000 years of age, no wonder that they do not bother to produce annual growth rings. As for celebrating eighty years, this would pass unmarked and unremarked in a baobab's life, although it is certainly fine for Stuart to celebrate his — in and on and with, reference to baobabs. He is, after all, a kinsman and an honorary member of their clan.

When Stuart was inducted the speaker added praise for the nurturing role of baobabs to the list of their good qualities such as long life, memory and deep roots in the African soil. It is true that, while not providing a cradle for mankind — we don't want to go that far back even if his ancestors had little feet — baobabs have, for thousands of years, provided an edible fruit rich in vitamin C and with a calcium content which exceeds that of cows' milk. The fruit pulp is known as 'monkey's bread'.

Apparently it is quite awful. It is so awful in fact that it is said that the taste of the baobabs' fruit displeased God so much that he turned the tree upside down, resulting in the odd shape we now know.

High in the branches of his family tree Stuart is related to a miller and also several generations of good publicans so he fits in well with the nurturing baobab clan, though his ancestors were all upstanding, upright people. The Saunders clan are known to be independent spirits. Like the baobabs, they stand alone even when forming part of a group. Baobabs do not weave their branches together to form canopies and interdependent arches.

They could never inspire a vaulted cathedral or even a green thought, but they are grand in their own way as they open their crowns to the sky to welcome a parliament of birds, a few monkeys and any passing vice-chancellors.

Long before the baobabs found Stuart, he claimed membership of the elephant clan based on a myth which we chose to believe because we loved elephants and the idea of their caring society.

Stuart too, had a number of aunties to watch over him when he was young. He repaid their kindness by signing them all up for the Ovaltine Club on radio Lourenco Marques (now Maputo). According to the myth, the link between the Saunders family and elephants was forged when Stuart's ancestors heeded a call from Alexander the Great for support in battle. They fought valiantly and afterwards Alexander granted them the right to call themselves Of Alexander (El Zander — Sanders — Saunders) and to use the elephant as their family icon. In time the descendants of this tribe moved through Europe and, according to a footnote for the same myth, they were in Normandy in 1066 and took part in the crossing and all that. There is something familiar about one of the figures in the Bayeux tapestry. However, the Saunders tribe did arrive in England eventually and their descendants ran a good pub halfway between London and Oxford. Since then it has always been touch and go whether a Saunders would become an academic or a publican. Being a good host is part of the job description for both occupations.

Since membership of the elephant clan was assumed without ceremony, it was a great honour when the Kruger National Park named a big tusker 'Alexander', in Stuart's honour. Alexander is no longer with us, but his tusks are on display at Lethaba and his spirit has joined the elephants lined up on the horizon, facing the mighty baobab where Stuart lazes with his stash of pistachio nuts.

It has been a long day with friends and colleagues and one of Stuart's teachers, a famous professor of medicine, arriving at intervals since the first light of day. They followed different routes to get here but all of them crossed Stuart's landscape and he tracked the route of each one as they approached, remembering a shared history. Some of them came from far away and long ago and seemed to appear out of the haze of distance.

They arrived one by one, each one bearing a gift of words. If they had been medieval knights they would have arrived on their chargers with colours flying to honour a friend on his birthday by jousting and bleeding and breaking their bones falling on the ground. If they had been courtiers of a later period they would have powdered themselves

~ Anita Saunders ~

all over and arranged to dance in a complicated pattern with pointed toes.

But these are different times and they are academics, thinkers and critics used to palaver, who have come to honour Stuart by flying their colours and putting their best foot forward as they present their latest, their brightest thoughts under the baobab tree.

