

EIGHT DAYS IN THE KALAHARI  
by Christelle Duyvené de Wit

The Milky Way hung in a thick, wide band of jewels and stardust above me. I rolled over, hoping to sleep the two hours till dawn, but it was no use. My bladder was full to bursting, but there was absolutely no way I was climbing down the ladder from my bakkie-top tent to pee. Mufasa had been roaring all night and I had no desire to be surprised by a male lion in his prime.

I'd come to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park four days earlier to observe Hannes Lochner, a wildlife photographer, at his work—and already I was intoxicated by what I'd seen.

Playfully dubbed “spoiled brat”, because of the variety of animals I'd had the privilege to see in just a few short days, I didn't realise how fortunate I was until I was informed that a honey badger I'd seen the day before had only been seen a handful of times by Hannes in his 800 days in the Kalahari.

The daily routine was straightforward: up at dawn, a mug of coffee and a rusk in hand; out of the Rooiputs campsite by 6:30 to shoot in the pink morning light; drive to the next predator-territory to sit and wait, sometimes for the entire day, for a chance at his list of nigh-impossible shots; back to campfire tales and a braai by 7:00 pm before tumbling into bed. I could get used to this.

The light was dying as we rounded the corner, lavender-grey watercolour clouds on the horizon. We'd just spent the afternoon under the shade of a thorn tree, photographing Mufasa and a lioness with whom he would pair for the next six days. Most lions pair for two or three days, but Mufasa!—well, he was the king. There, in the inky shadow of another tree lay a lioness, on her back, her feet propped up against the sandy slope of the road. She turned her head and looked at us upside down, golden eyes shimmering in the headlights.

She was—beautiful. Sleek and slender, there was no mistaking her muscled power. We turned off the engine to take her in. As the deep stillness of that moment seeped into the bakkie, I heard Hannes catch his breath. An instant later, I'd seen it too, my heart lurching with adrenaline. Only two meters away lay Murthu, another male lion, black-maned head resting on his huge paws, languidly inspecting us. We were so close I could see his surprisingly coarse eyelashes, the bits of grass and twigs trapped in his mane. I wanted to roll up the windows, but Hannes was making the most of the moment. Like a reflex, he had his 300mm propped up on the open window, and was fiddling for his flash. I couldn't breathe. The likelihood that Murthu would charge was small, Hannes whispered. Now if it had been Mufasa, that would have been a different story. I guess that's what happens when you spend over two years with the same animals—you get to know them.

Knowing the individual temperaments of animals doesn't mean you don't respect them as wild beasts. Sitting around the campfire with some friends later that evening, they began to regale me with stories of lion encounters. Because Rooiputs is an open campsite, the animals have free reign. We were on their turf. And so it wasn't unlikely that an entire pride would traipse through the camp at night, pausing to sniff at the tents, with only a suddenlyfragile sheet of canvas between you and a lion's jaw. There were more stories: Hannes has some beyond-belief shots of lions mating at night, taken a mere six meters from his tent. I wasn't sure I would have been that bold. I would probably have been like one of the others, lying in the middle of my tent as far away from the sides as possible, a panga clutched to my chest.

I was grateful when dawn finally broke, bush doves coo-cooing. Hannes laughed when I told him about my tossing and turning, my fear of peeing—probably the lions would have been so frightened they'd have been the ones running off. Frightened lions or not, I'll have to figure out something, because I'll be back. There's something about the Kalahari that'll lure you, woo you. Maybe not after a week, where you'll escape with only a tanned hide and a scorching thirst for air conditioning, but if you stay long enough to become entranced by the bleached arid andscape, you'll find yourself changed.