



CORRIENTES



PUBLISHING

PARKER GRIFFON

Swimming in Air

SWIMMING IN AIR

Parker Griffon

CORRIENTES  PUBLISHING

Swimming in Air
Copyright © 2025 by Parker Griffon.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

The events in this book happened. To protect their privacy, nearly everyone's name and associated details have been changed. The narrative is as accurate as memory allows. I am confident that if this story were told by someone who was there at the time, it might differ in detail, but not in substance.

ISBN: 979-8-9998392-0-6

For more information, contact: parker@parkergriffon.com

One day, two young fish are swimming along when they meet an older fish going the other way. "Morning, boys," he says. "How's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a while when one turns to the other and asks, "What's water?"

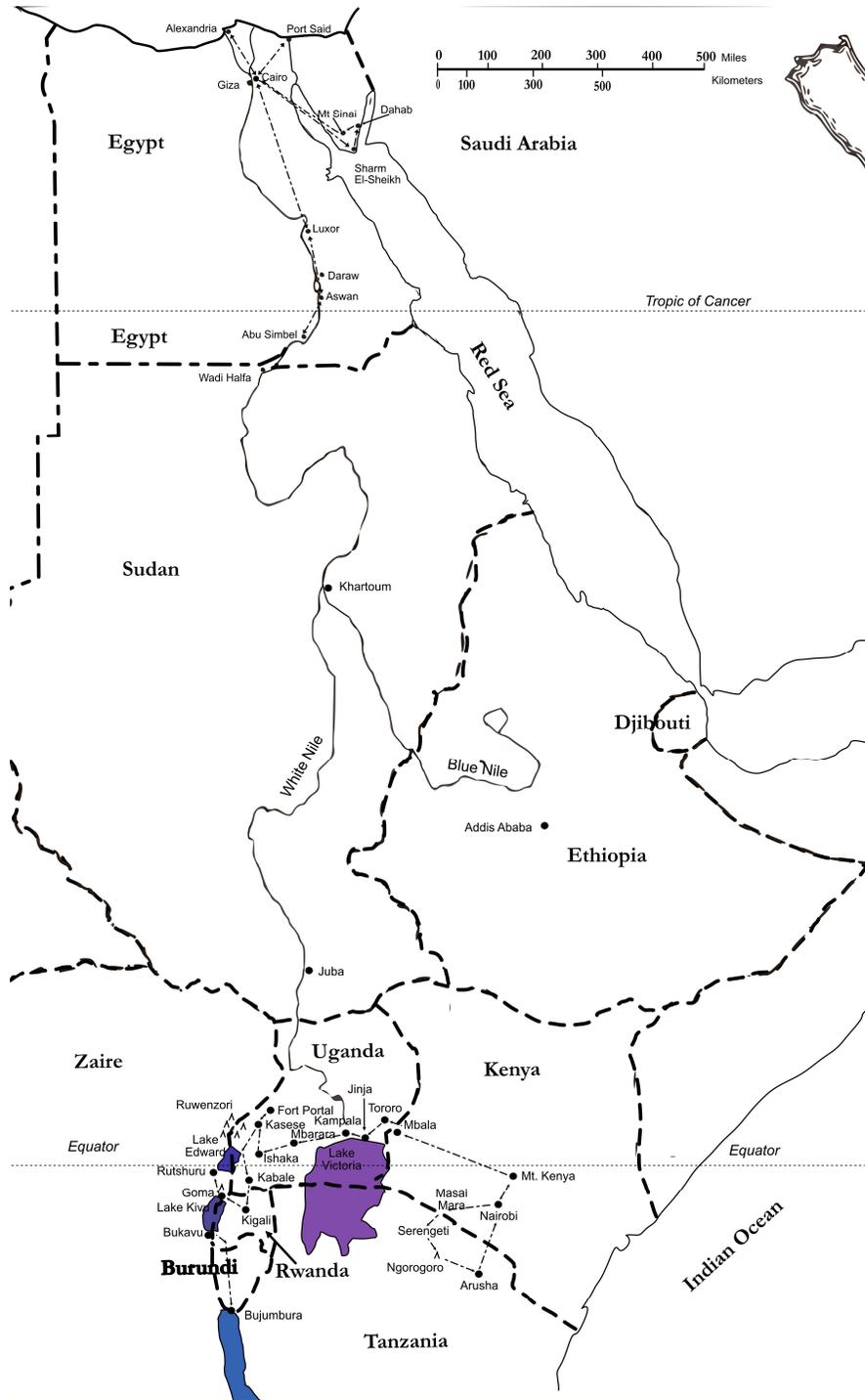
— David Foster Wallace

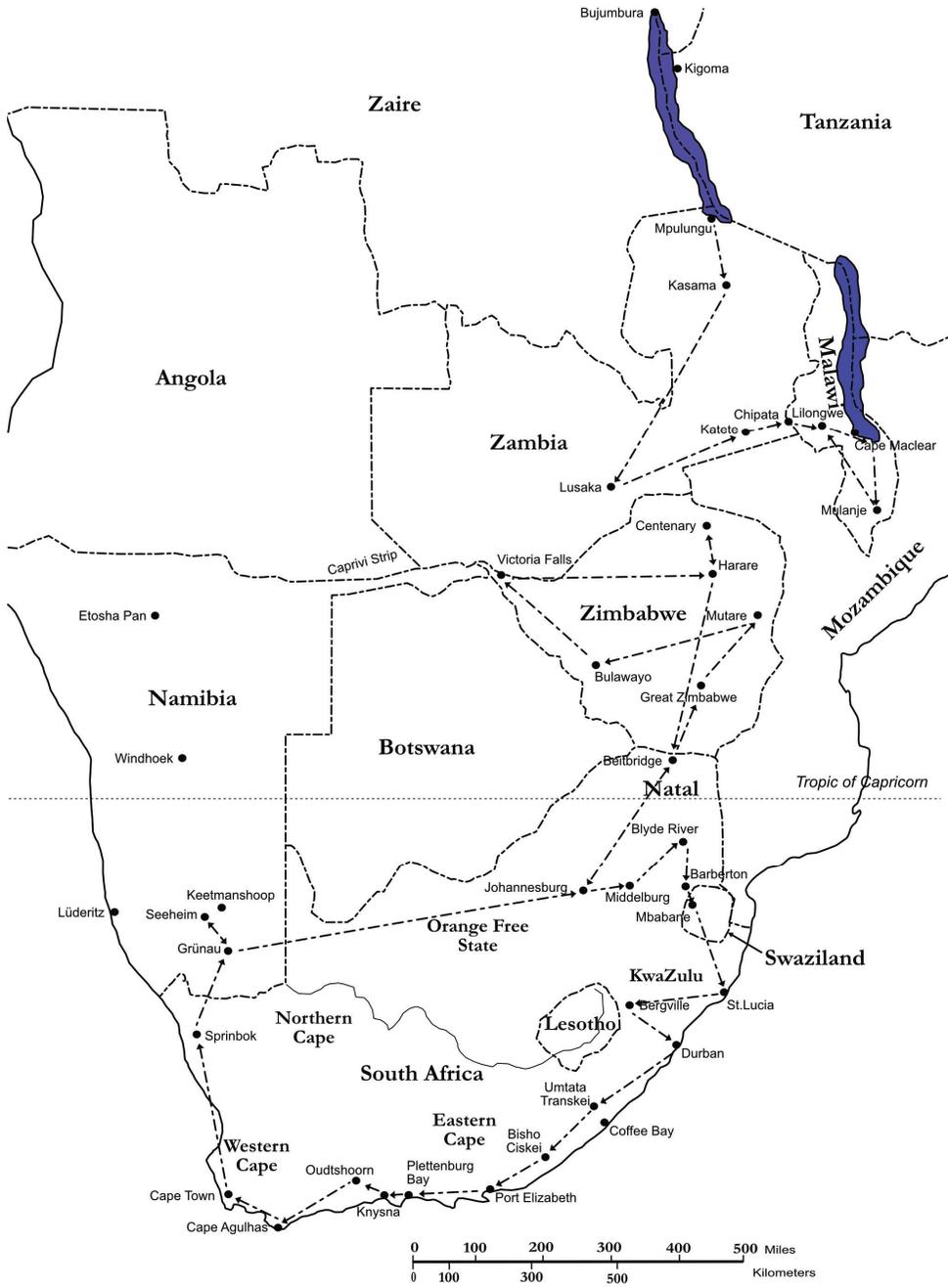
"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

— Frederick Buechner

AFRICA 1988







PROLOGUE

March, 1988. My hand brushed the other side of the bed, expecting Vivian's warm softness, but I felt only cool, empty sheets. Of course, she wasn't there. Still groggy after the eleven-hour flight from Johannesburg to London, I settled back, stared at the ornate ceiling of my aging Edwardian-era hotel room, and thought about how we live each day as a slight variation of the last, until it isn't.

Three weeks earlier, Vivian and I were in French-speaking Zaire, sitting outside our tent, eating dinner, and swatting mosquitoes. After contemplating yet another meal of bland rice and unknown meat, she looked at me and said softly, "I'm tired of nothing working, of everyone staring at me. I'm tired of hand-washing my clothes every day, of looking like a rag lady, and of constantly translating for you."

At first, I wondered why now? We had been living out of backpacks for six months, and that day was only a slight variation on most of them. But then I thought about the load she had been carrying for both of us since we left English-speaking East Africa weeks earlier. As she told me in frustration at one point, I couldn't even order escargot in French.

Hoping she was finished, I said nothing. Unfortunately, she wasn't. Looking at me with those beautiful, now sad blue eyes, she quietly said, "And I'm tired of you."

I let her words hang in the air, hoping they'd evaporate. But they didn't.

The alarm clock went off, and I reluctantly began my reentry into the corporate world. Pulling back the curtains, I found a typical gray late-March day in London, rain coming and going without warning. After showering and getting reacquainted with a razor, I looked like any other worker bee in a suit, except for the now red and irritated part of my deeply tanned face where a beard had been until moments before. Running late, I hurried onto the busy Kensington High Street. The tie I'd struggled to remember how to knot that morning began chafing my neck. Shiny wingtips that hadn't seen feet before rubbed a blister on my heel. Having forgotten to buy an umbrella, my conservative new wool business suit soon grew itchy and damp.

Promptly at nine, I arrived at the office of Lurnix Labs, a British tech startup, and told the receptionist I was there to meet with Allan. She stared at me, seemingly puzzled. I wondered whether it was my two-toned face or my American accent. Then I remembered the no-first-names rule of British business. "Parker Griffon to meet with Allan Bailey." That seemed to do it. She motioned me toward a row of chairs. I took a seat and was staring at a

poster proclaiming UNIX the future of computing when a middle-aged woman, conservatively dressed in a tailored blazer and matching skirt, appeared before me.

“Good morning, Mr. Griffon.” She extended her hand. “Evelyn Lawrence, Mr. Bailey’s secretary.”

She led me to a conference room and gestured toward a seat. Turning to the beverage station on a credenza, she asked, “Coffee or tea?”

“Coffee, thank you.”

“Mr. Bailey says you’ve been traveling rough through Africa for some months with your ... uh.” She paused pouring the coffee.

“My fiancé,” I lied. Ms. Lawrence’s expression hinted at wanting more, so I pulled a picture from my wallet and traded it for the coffee.

“Well. She’s quite beautiful. And that hair suits her perfectly. Is she Scots?”

“No, she’s Argentine.”

Seemingly unable to place a strawberry blonde in South America, she handed the photo back and changed the subject. “I hope there were no problems with the flights we arranged.” She waited for my nod. “And is the hotel comfortable?”

“Yes, thank you. Hot water and a soft bed. I was in heaven.”

“Is your fiancé here with you?”

I couldn’t think of a way to avoid the question. “No, she’s still in Africa.”

“In Johannesburg, seeing the sights?”

“She’s in Malawi,” I replied. “When I last saw her, she was heading into the bush. I suppose she’s somewhere around Monkey Bay by now.”

Her eyebrows rose ever so slightly before her expression returned to neutral. “Alone?”

“Well, yes.”

Even the proper Ms. Lawrence couldn’t conceal her disapproval. Fortunately, the thought of my beautiful fiancé hacking her way through the jungle with a machete, watched by curious chimps squatting unseen in the canopy above, stumped her long enough for Mr. Bailey to arrive.

“Thank you, Evelyn,” he said, a polite way of dismissing her.

The last time I saw Allan Bailey, my small software operation in Munich was being dismantled by a British private equity firm. Since my German residence permit disappeared with the company, I was packing the last of my belongings when Allan unexpectedly called. He said he didn’t have a presence outside the UK and asked if I’d be interested in setting up Lurnix’s US operations. It was a great opportunity, but I thanked him and said I wasn’t interested. I was burned out from too much time on the tech hamster wheel

and needed space to think. Then there was Vivian, who had no interest in moving to the US.

Allan persisted, showing remarkable flexibility. Do what you have to do for six months, he said, then come back. Believing I would have everything figured out by then, I agreed. I was wrong.

As Ms. Lawrence closed the door behind her, Allan and I shook hands and switched to first names, a mid-Atlantic nod to my unfortunate Americanness. "Good to see you, Parker," he said. "It looks like the stop in Johannesburg gave you enough time to buy a suit."

I nodded. The clothes had also cost more than two months of backpacking.

"That telex you sent surprised me." Telexes were mechanical typewriters that could spit out only 66 characters per second, but they were the least expensive and sometimes the only way to send a long-distance message quickly from sub-Saharan Africa. "It's been, what, seven months? How did you end up staying in Africa? Weren't you two going around the world?"

"Things change. You meet someone who tells you about a place just over the hill, so you flag down a truck and go there. Then there's another person, another hill, and another truck. Before you know it, you're a couple of thousand miles down the road and time's gone by."

"No matter. It's great to see you. How are things with your girlfriend? Will she be moving to the States with you?"

"Absolutely." Another fib.

Allan fell silent, waiting for more, but I focused on stirring my coffee. After an awkward pause, he said, "Well, why don't we get started?"

Throughout the morning, we made good progress on revenue forecasts, headcount, and total investment. As we finished our working lunch, Ms. Lawrence softly knocked on the conference room door. "Pardon me for the interruption," she said, handing me a telex. "This just arrived, Mr. Griffon. It's from your fiancé and appears to be urgent."

"Fiancé!" Allan exclaimed, smiling. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Sorry, it slipped my mind," I replied, surprised at how quickly lies grow legs. I took the telex and scanned it.

FM: VIVIAN, MAIN POST OFFICE, LILONGWE, MALAWI
TO: PARKER GRIFFON C/O ALLAN BAILEY, LURNIX LABS
HAVE MALARIA. 60USD LEFT. TRANSFER DIDN'T ARRIVE.
MAY NEED YOUR HELP. WILL TELEX NUMBER FOR CALL
TOMORROW.
V

I sat perfectly still, my stomach tightening.

We knew malaria from our months in Africa. At best, it meant days of debilitating chills, fevers, and vomiting. At worst, it was fatal. That she made it to the main post office gave me hope, unless, of course, someone had sent the telex for her.

I took a deep breath and carefully parsed the note. The telex was intentionally brief, probably to save money. After a quick mental calculation, I decided that \$60 would last three days if she were at a hostel or a week if she were in the tent. But could she be tenting alone with malaria? Then I thought about healthcare costs in Malawi and decided she probably didn't have even three days.

Knowing her independent streak, what worried me most was that if she wrote that she might need help, she almost certainly did.

I had barely convinced her to write Lurnix's telex number in her little notebook. She wanted time alone, she said, and that didn't involve sending me expensive notes. Now the telex was the only slender thread connecting us. Phones capable of international calls were scarce in that part of the world. Until she found one and sent the number with a time to call, all I could do was wait.