

Hunting Life

MOMENTS OF TRUTH

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BATEMAN
BOOKS 

Fever Pitch

If you go to wild places often enough you'll begin to see elegance, the subtle webs that tie all life together. It is also true that if you cover enough ground there will be moments that you want to wipe from memory, from having ever happened at all. I've been lucky, mine have been few.

In some places it was animals in poacher's snares, wild-eyed and doomed by their injuries, or the heartbreaking piles of skin and bones where the thief had not bothered to return for his catch. The elephant with his tusks crudely axed out, or the woman dead from HIV for three days in a baking hut. Nobody would move her; there was something wrong that none of the locals would explain, witchcraft perhaps. Despite the stifling heat, we put on our jackets and sunglasses and wound tee-shirts around our faces in case she burst.

Others have had worse moments. Cameroon has always been a place of exploitation. It sits squarely in The Hinge, right where Africa veers suddenly westward. It is described by almost every source as one of the most corrupt places on Earth. Government forces are routinely accused of murder, torture, detention without cause. Bandits and terrorist groups from neighbouring Nigeria wander freely.

Many stories come out of the jungle. Most have savagery and strangeness at their core: a sense that in that place our rules, so carefully built over centuries, are as a leaf on the forest floor that will be gone tomorrow.

*'The sun was fierce, the land seemed to
glisten and drip with steam.'*

JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*

You come in by light plane on strips that the logging companies have dozed through red dirt, piggybacking off their operations. In the mornings a breath of mist hangs over the forest. Where there are gaps in the canopy, brilliant shafts of light pierce through to its floor, but by noon there is nothing but harsh sun and the wall of green.

This is the corner where Cameroon meets the Central African Republic and the Congo. Over the river is Bayanga, the nearest border town. The camp itself is pleasant, surrounded by clean red earth. But just beyond that tiny human footprint, the wall begins. This is nothing like the oak and pine woods of gentle climates. It's a riot of shining leaves fighting for light, twisted lichen-splotched lianas and giant hardwoods. There are insects everywhere — in the air, under everything and across everything. Any wood that hits the forest floor is quickly reduced to a punky pulp.

It rains often here. The sun and heat and water between them power life at its most frenetic — it seethes at precisely the same rate that decay consumes it. Everything from towering forest trees like ebony to the smallest parasol fungus is either swelling with growth or being torn apart. It pulses, swarms, perishes and rots as you watch.

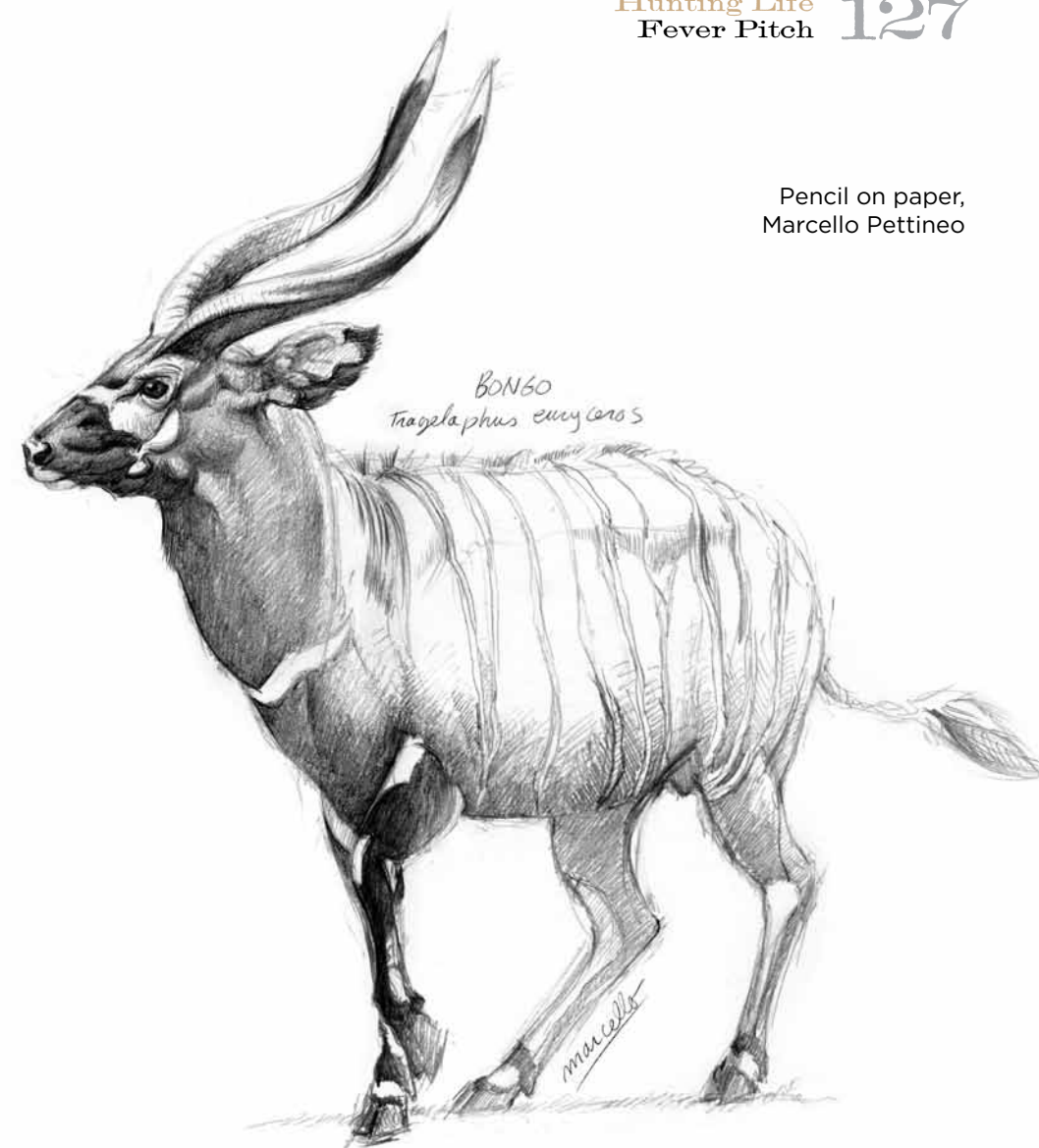
This is the place of lowland gorillas, forest buffalo, leopard and monkeys. But you hardly see any of them. That's the enigma of the rainforest: it is at once a riot of life, but at the same time almost empty of large animals. Those that are there are mostly sly and secretive to a fault. They know in their bones how to slip between the trees, how to use the shadows, how to drift to nothing before your eyes.

At the heart of this forest is an impossible creature. It was first described to Europeans by the Irish naturalist and lawyer William Ogilby in 1837. Ogilby was secretary of the Royal Zoological Society of London, knew Darwin, and was the first to document several African animals. The animal he described was a large, sturdy antelope, coloured a rich improbable red like the rainforest soil itself, covered in long white stripes and carrying thick lyrate horns.

This was the western bongo, but most of the early hunting stories came from the eastern bongo of Kenya. One of the least known was that of Kermit Roosevelt, who travelled there with his father, Theodore, on their epic safari of 1909. Up on Kenya's Mau escarpment as a guest of Berkeley Cole, Kermit and four Ndorobo trackers followed and finally secured the first bongo known for certain to be taken by a white man.

Decades later the American writer Warren Page began his bongo safari in Bayanga, just over the river from where this story takes place. After much

Pencil on paper,
Marcello Pettineo



patience he got his bull by sitting high up in a *machan* in the rain for days. That used to be the way, sitting over a *bai* — one of the wonderful open forest clearings, often near a salt lick. Today, not so much. Today, no dogs means little success.

Bongo appear to crave salt. They have been known to eat burned wood after lightning storms, apparently finding something in the ash they like. To move quickly through heavy forest, they lie their horns back. It is said that some big old bulls have even worn patches in their hide from lying their horn tips down over the years.

You can, if you're so inclined, try to buy your way through with some

big game. A good scout might locate a great specimen of some species and stake out its location and habits. That won't work with bongo. You can't buy success. There are no shortcuts. You do it or you don't.



'There were moments when one's past came back . . . but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.'

JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*

The Baka used to be called 'pygmies'. The men are on average about five feet tall. They are hunter-gatherers, today sometimes alternating between village life and jungle camps of small domed huts, a frame of sticks covered by leaves. The men hunt constantly until the surrounding area is cleaned out, then they move on. It's mainly small game — often duikers, but really anything that can be caught. They worship a forest spirit and sing songs to him after a successful hunt.

However, their forest is being rapidly cut down for the powerful one-two punch of logging and planting palm oil plantations. There is also a lot of poaching by the larger black races, who despise the Baka and often kept them as slaves. It still happens today. Half of Baka children don't make it to five. Life for them is to be a small force against a much greater one, every single day. It has never been anything else.

They have — and this is meant in a respectful, admiring way — the enthusiasm of young children. They want to hunt anything. They're all smiles and jokes until they see even a monitor lizard, and then it's all on. It's the only way to survive.

A bongo hunt needs the Baka, not just because of their tracking skills, but because of their spirit. They light everything up: half of such a hunt is the experience with them and the dogs. It is otherwise a bleak exercise.



You don't see animals in the jungle, just the green wall and the bugs. Maybe something skittering in the leaves or the flash of a bird. It's dark in there, so dark the Baka must sometimes feel the tracks with their fingers. They rotate the lead tracker from time to time. The trackers smoke lots of marijuana, even by African tribal standards, all the time. The jungle is not Eden. It's a pressure-cooker.

HIV is rampant. Rabies can surface anywhere. Filarial worm is common enough. Don't go barefoot — sandfleas will happily lodge in the skin near your toenails to feed and grow fat as a pea. There's *loa loa* from fly-bites. Moving around the body, the adult worm can sometimes traverse across the victim's eye, making for a very interesting ten minutes or so. Over the border to the east is the Ebola River, the one that gave its name to the deadly virus. Some of its victims die in haemorrhagic convulsions. There's bilharzia, tickbite fever, sleeping sickness from tsetse fly-bites, river blindness. This basin of the great Congo is the cradle of human disease, but it seems that the Baka have developed a degree of resistance to some of the infections and parasites of the jungle.

Their hunting packs are made up of the usual Third-World pariah dogs — much like a dingo, a mix of tawny red and black with socks and chest patches, loose-limbed and whippet-thin. Putsi fly are a plague on them. The tiny larvae live in the dirt around camps, and on contact move into the body to settle and grow. There they feed, turning into a jellybean-sized maggot

under the skin that eventually bores out and drops to the ground to begin the cycle again. A badly infected dog can carry plenty and is still expected to hunt. You might think these mutts look like hell, but drop a classy first-world dog in there and he'll be dead before you can blink, no matter how much of a brute he might be. The village dogs have a thousand generations of resistance on their side.

The dogs and the Baka are echoes of each other.



'One can't live with one's finger everlastingly on one's pulse.'

JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Rayno Egner, lean, blond and blue-eyed, lives in a beautiful home. It overlooks a valley of farmland and forest in the highlands of South Africa. I have stood there and looked across that valley to the towering Drakensberg capped with snow. You can shoot doves here off the cut corn. It's a fine place to come home to a wife and two lovely kids. But life is also to be lived. Rayno was a hunter for a long time, but in recent years he has taken to the camera. He will forgive me when I say that he is at the forefront of what he does — filming conservation projects, hunting projects, wild places and how we may keep them.

Rayno and two hunters, Chance and Justin, arrived in Cameroon ready for anything. There is always that buzz at the start of a big trip like this. By the time evening settled over Douala, they were ready to shoot the breeze over a few cold beers. Out on the verandah of the hotel big moths and strange bugs battered the lights as they talked about adventures in other places and how this one would go. The next morning they were in a light plane heading for the farthest corner of a faraway country.

Here it rains every second day or so. Not the gentle showers of the temperate world, but the flat, heavy downpours of the tropics, hard and loud. That's the defining feature of this kind of hunting. You're wet all the time: sometimes from sweat, sometimes a downpour, often both. You drink and drink to replace it, hoping that the water is safe.

After rain the bongo move out into forest openings, perhaps crossing a logging road or moving to a lick. Once you find a large fresh track, the Baka trackers begin their magic out front. The hunting begins with great optimism. The first few days are often spent scouting, following



spoor, settling into rhythm, but this time the Baka are lost in the forest on the first day. The team spends several hours circling quietly until things straighten out. On the fifth day Chance and his team follow a bongo track into the jungle, but after a short distance the Baka halt abruptly. In these moments you know that something is just ahead and feel a sudden flutter of excitement.

Forest elephant. The Baka don't like it: too close, the animal is agitated, plenty of scope for something to go wrong. The party backs out in a hurry to circle and pick up the bongo track more safely, but they are never going to catch up. They hit an old forestry road and start to head for home just as the gunfire erupts — the unmistakable stamped-steel, short-barrelled stutter of several AKs. Twenty rounds or so. Within a few seconds two angry, frightened elephant are on the road in front of them, another behind.

These aren't subsistence poachers. This is a heavily armed and organised party. A guy with a hunting rifle is no match for that kind of firepower, especially in thick bush, so the team backs out in a hurry. Whatever nightmare is going down, there is nothing they can do about it right now.

Later they radio the army and authorities about the poacher contact. The hunters are shaken. This isn't what they've signed up for, but the



promise of military support seems sincere. Then it emerges that the Baka were not lost at all on the first day. The trackers had felt that the group was being followed and were trying to shake off whoever was dogging their steps. So a choice lay on the table: go home with no questions asked or play the game? The group decided to forge on. No going back.

Justin gets lucky and takes his bull, but Chance is not. He works and works, but nothing comes together. Around the tenth day the team bump a bull with the dogs, but he gives them the slip. It's usually a waste of time to try again, but with time running out they push on. The second phase is a four-hour tracking job, hard work in that jungle. And it comes to nothing.

Finally, the tide begins to turn. They follow a track and there is a glimpse of red hide through the leaves. There's barking, excited yaps, the throb of the jungle. The barking goes up a notch as the bull bails, spinning fast to lower his horns at the dogs. The team has to struggle through thick tangles to reach them, and suddenly the air is full of shouted instructions in French and Baka. A hunter from 10,000 years ago would recognise this scene in an instant. As the dogs clear the bull, a shot rings out. They are still barking, but the bull has gone, vanished, swallowed up instantly by the dense forest.

After a pause and some signals, the Baka move quietly to the trail. Very soon there are claps and singing from the trackers — Chance finally has his bongo. There are no tape-measure moments. These are the kind of guys



Baka carry out.

who just want a good old bull past his days, they're the sort who don't care about inches. The hunt is the trophy.

They use *pangas* to clear a path to the bull through impenetrable tangles. There's plenty of sweat as the knife-work starts, and flies are gathering already. Hours later as they come back into camp there is celebration singing, hands high in the air and waving leaves. It's another scene from a remote past.



Hippo, they say, kill more people than any creature in Africa. Others will confidently tell you that crocodiles do. The whole thing is nonsense — African countries don't do accurate statistics of what happens out in the *bundu*, and for sure the mosquito wins this game hands-down. It has been estimated that malaria has killed more humans through history than any other cause, perhaps half the people that have ever lived.

The parasite takes the body through cold, hot and sweating stages. There is fever, severe headache, vomiting. If it's a bad dose, you can simply drop into semi-consciousness, convulsions and bleeding — *falciparum* malaria can kill you in twenty-four hours from the onset of symptoms. Organs start to shut down and if they do you will die. It's not reported because it happens all the time. In 2018 there were over 230 million cases of malaria.

On that first night out in the city, a mosquito took blood from a malaria

victim. The parasite entered the mosquito's body before it flew away. Somewhere during those beers on the verandah — with moths circling the lights and the bustle of the port town around them — that same mosquito landed on Rayno and bit him, too. The parasites entered his blood and found their way to his liver. He had no symptoms for ten days or so, but during that time they were multiplying quickly. Then they burst out into his bloodstream. At one o'clock on the morning of the twelfth day, Rayno wakes cold and shivering in the remote jungle camp to find that he has malaria in spades.



It's time to be going. The team drives two and a half hours to the airstrip to catch the light plane out, but at the tiny airfield there is a phone call to say the plane is not coming. It needs a part before it can fly and that might take a week or more. It's a quiet group that drives back to camp.

It's obvious that Rayno is deteriorating fast. Frantically they check around for any other companies, other individuals, anyone who can fly them out. There is nothing. As a last resort they try an unknown guy in Chad. He wants big money, he wants it in the bank and he wants it cleared before he'll even get in the cockpit. Some of the group think it's a scam, but Justin is hell-bent on getting out. With a lot of wrangling the money is sent and they arrange with the pilot to rendezvous again at 7.30 next morning to see if he has made it into Yaoundé and cleared Customs.

It's another long, rough night for Rayno, but it is a hopeful group that assembles in the morning. There is, of course, no phone call. They call around looking for the pilot, and eventually find him. He's not coming, there is a mechanical problem. Chance looks at Justin. 'I told you so.'

That's the moment it hits. Stuck in the middle of the Congo basin, a guy sinking hard with malaria and no way out. That's the moment when the adventure and the jokes wear thin. There's nobody to help, just the green wall staring at you. Shit, as they say, just got real.



Like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Driving from the border right up through Cameroon then east to west across its length is described by authorities as 'theoretically possible'. It's a twenty-six- to thirty-hour drive with no communications on some of the most dangerous roads in Africa. There are corrupt forestry officials, army, police, bandits. Bad guys everywhere.

But with no other options the drive begins. All cameras must be kept out of sight because of the deforestation and other goings-on. The government is paranoid about journalists, and they keep a keen lookout for camera equipment. Just a month before a cameraman was detained at the airport. You can easily be accused of being a spy for Greenpeace — and somehow the police already know your name, likely through an informer. You can be interrogated and detained. Forestry companies don't like the idea of anybody getting footage of what they do.

The first sixteen hours is on dirt. There are no stones in the road base, no timber, nothing solid, just bright-red mud, washouts, collapsed bridges. The monotony is extreme. Deep potholes are everywhere from the logging trucks chewing their way out. They pass lots of timber trucks, and the side of the road is littered in poverty. Mud houses held together by sticks, a basic thatch roof with barely any walls.

At midnight they roll into Bertoua. There is nowhere to stay but a filthy little jungle hotel. The vibe is as sketchy as hell. They pile their bags against the door of their room and sleep on the floor rather than risk putting skin on the beds. There is a four-hour window for resting before pushing on. Most of the group don't get any sleep, as there are bullfrogs and a rooster outside making noise all night. The air is hot, damp, oppressive. Rayno is the only one who sleeps under the sheets, shivering and fevered. Four hours later they start to move again, this time in low spirits from lack of sleep. Back on the road there is the endless convoy of timber trucks. It is about then that they start to see the bodies.

Just lying on the side of the road, like garbage. Were these people hit by trucks? Have they simply died and been thrown to the edge? Were they refugees? Each was somebody's baby once.

The guys are quiet. They know that some kind of line has been crossed here. More driving, hour after hour. They are weary and fading, but also on edge from all the roadblocks — forestry, police, army, local chiefs, you name it. Young jocks, each waving the obligatory AK with banana magazine. The usual Third-World petty official shit. They're looking for a handout at every turn. Ease into the blockade with a hand full of cash out the window and a blur of French. Don't get out of the car. Don't stare at the guns.



Driving on, there's another body thrown to the side of the road. They begin to wonder how many are under the mud, unseen. The drive drones on. Nobody wants to be here anymore. They are at the edge of an abyss and they know it.

The drivers are fading so Justin gives them a dose of Adarol. Optimistically described as a stimulant, it's one of the amphetamine family. Not long after that the driving reaches a new level. The four-wheel-drive is drifting into corners in a slew of mud, fishtailing as the engine roars. They are clocking 160 kilometres an hour on roads not fit for horses. Nobody wants to be the first to say slow down. Eventually sense prevails, because around every blind corner is some kind of hazard — a blockade, people, animals. From start to finish they pass through twenty-one roadblocks, each with its own mix of open piracy and sinister possibility.

They pull into Yaoundé, rest briefly, then on and on. And on. Twenty-eight hours in they hit Douala, the end of the line, and stop on the bank of a river to buy prawns and a beer. Medical help is near.

Only then do they understand what they have done.

The Baka have been hunting bongo since forever. The forest could always make more. The same goes for the handful taken by the tiny number of outsiders prepared to front the risk and expense involved. But now the forest is disappearing fast. No forest means no Baka, no dogs. No bongo.

What is claiming the world's wildlife? By reflex we look to put a face on the problem. The handful of hunters old and new are a lazy choice. In reality, it is vast, faceless forces that are truly eating the old places up — wire snares, chainsaws, the poacher's AK-47, poisoned carcasses, overgrazing by goats and cattle. The instruments of naked greed.

Perhaps that is why we peer at the wall of green and see a vengeful, brooding thing. For once we are seeing our own savage desires reflected back to us in equal measure.

