NOVEMBER 2004

It is hot, heat waves distort the images of the two lionesses spread out to full length in the meager shade of an acacia scrub. Wiping the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand I turn around. Red faces and wide eyes meet mine. "This is awesome!" Barbara whispers the words on everyone's lips. She is trying to steady Twist with one hand while taking a photograph with the other. The horses are nervous. The wind has shifted, alerting their razor sharp senses to the danger. "It is time to leave ladies!" I manage to croak, as Riva again pulls the reins through my dirty fingers.

It's been a good day; this morning we set off on the final stretch of what will be my last wilderness safari of the season. Shortly after sunrise we found signs of elephant. Freshly broken branches that littered the savanna floor and steamy heaps of dung provided us with a clear trail that led us to where a small kinship group was demolishing an umbrella thorn tree. A newborn calf was clumsily looking for milk between the legs of his wrinkly old mother. She gently and expertly guided him to her teats with her trunk and with loud slurping noises he showed his appreciation. Mother and child were blissfully unaware of the fact that they were burning images into our minds that would certainly stay with us forever. We left in silence unable to explain how much this simple, beautiful show of motherly love meant to each of us. It was getting hotter and we still had a long way to go so I decided to push on. Galloping across the plains our hoof beats attracted a journey of giraffe that stayed with us until we pulled up five kilometers further. It was when we started to walk again that we saw the lions.

By now all the horses are aware of the lions and when the older lioness shakes her head to rid herself of a particularly annoying oxpecker they all jump, ready to take flight. I barely need to point Riva down the steep bank and he practically flies into the dry riverbed of the Majale River. At the bottom I wait until the last of my companions makes it safely down before scampering up the next bank. With the river now between the lions and us everybody talks simultaneously and I am flooded with questions like; *won't they follow us?* And *weren't there more than two?* Just another day at the office, I think as I spur my old friend onwards in the direction of Zeederburg camp.

Upon reflection it is with sadness that I will say goodbye to 2004. We met so many new friends and we sincerely hope that we will see all of you again in the not so distant future. At Fort Jamesons we are all very excited about the new season. For those of you that have got plans to join us next year there will be long nights spent in the company of good red wine in front of our new fireplace. We are also very excited about all the small changes around the camp that are definitely going to enhance the aesthetic beauty of our unique base.

Our horses have done extremely well this year and if anything, look better than at the start of the season. The old favorites like Boots, Rascal, Moyeni, Strider, Tommy, and Frank are still making riders laugh (and cry when they have to leave). The new boys however are fast becoming just as experienced and are making us proud. Big John is going to be a force to be reckoned with!

So to all our fellow pioneers out there here's wishing you the best for the festive season, ride safely and avoid the really deep ditches. From, Cor, Louise, West and me.

Kobus.