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# Dylan van Eijkeren

## *I Saw a Monkey*

*Travel Letters from recent South Africa*

Original title:

*Ik zag een aap. Reisbrieven uit het nieuwste Zuid-Afrika*

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Current title with regards to the residential elections in April 2009 and in the run-up the 2010 Fifa World Cup

A modern version of *The Great Trek* by a travel writer who measures up to the world's best

### About the author

Dylan van Eijkeren (1967) was a journalist for *Privé*, *Nieuwe Revu* and *Elsevier*, among others. He resigned from the latter magazine at the end of 2003 in order to travel through Germany and to write the book 'The Only Guest – A Journey of Discovery through Germany' (*De enige gast. Een ontdekkingsreis door Duitsland*). The book was very well received, and was nominated for the 2005 Bob den Uyl prize for the best travel book.

He subsequently became editor of *Esquire*, and wrote 'Witboi – How the West was Lost' (*Witboi. Hoe de West werd verloren*) on Suriname and the Antilles.

His successful travel book on Belgium appeared in 2008: 'The Best Country in the World' (*Het beste land ter wereld*). He is currently writing on a freelance basis for various weekly and monthly publications.

[www.dylanvaneijkeren.nl](http://www.dylanvaneijkeren.nl)



### About the book

#### The Great Trek

For his fourth travel book, Dylan van Eijkeren journeys to the darkest continent: Africa. To the Dutch, South Africa is the most remote country, but near to them at the same time, because of the colonial past. Van Eijkeren went there three times in 2008. His route: highway N1, which runs from the border with Zimbabwe in the northeast, to Cape Town in the southwest, a distance of 1,899 kilometres. The N1 not only crosses the entire country diagonally, but also culturally, socially, and economically.

He drove the whole N1, N2, N3 and N4, rode on a long, luxurious train, and after some months arrived via the N7 back in Cape Town, where his journey had started.

It was a round trip of 9781 kilometres by car, 2,060 kilometres along a bumpy track, about 600 kilometres on foot, a fleet of taxis, 1,200 metres in a cable car and two sailings in the Indian Ocean.

South Africa has a troubled past and still has many social problems. With his characteristic light-footed tone, journalist Dylan van Eijkeren grabs the most sensitive subjects by the horns in the course of random encounters and incidental detours. Such as:

- \* How is the moderate president Mbeki's less polished successor, Jacob Zuma, performing?
- \* How do people think the huge investments in infrastructure for the World Cup football tournament in 2010 will be recouped?
- \* What will happen when Nelson Mandela, father of the nation and peacemaking unifier, dies?
- \* Is the Cape the new Cote d'Azur, or does a veiled form of colonialism persist there?
- \* What does a person do if he develops an affection for a bar-room hooker?
- \* What are the differences within the country: between the affluent white areas of Cape Town and the gangs in Johannesburg. How are the 'black diamonds', the black nouveau riches in Soweto, getting on?
- \* Do roots, garlic and virgins really help against AIDS?

Dylan van Eijkeren, *Ik zag een aap. Reisbrieven uit het nieuwste Zuid-Afrika*

ISBN 978 90 445 1319 6

Paperback, 352 p.

Date of publication: 3 April 2009

## **Bibliography**

*De enige gast. Een ontdekkingsreis door Duitsland* ('The Only Guest – A Journey of Discovery through Germany') (2004, travel literature)

*Witboi, Hoe de West werd verloren* ('Witboi – How the West was Lost') (2006, travel literature)

*Het beste land ter wereld. Een reis door België* ('The Best Country in the World – A Journey through Belgium') (2008, travel literature)

*Ik zag een aap. Reisbrieven uit het nieuwste Zuid-Afrika.* ('I Saw a Monkey. Travel Letters from the Latest South Africa') (2009, travel literature)

## **Prizes and awards**

Nominated for the 2005 Bob den Uyl prize for 'The Only Guest'

Nominated for the 2009 Bob den Uyl prize for 'The Best Country in the World – A Journey through Belgium'

### **The press about ‘The Only Guest’:**

‘It is not only very well written, but it makes a very useful travel guide.’ – *Reizen*

‘An equally hilarious and thorough report of a three-month tour of Germany.’ – *Grande*

‘Van Eijkeren has written a funny travel book about a country of which we didn’t know such a thing could be done. (...) The trip produced funny, often hilarious, certainly revealing and sometimes even moving stories.’ – *Nieuwe Revu*

‘Eloquent.’ – *Esquire*

‘A success.’ – *Elsevier*

‘Brilliant debut.’ – *cindyhoetmer.nl*

### **The press about *Witboi*:**

‘*Witboi*’s forte is its wealth of amusing self-reflections and laconic humour, lavishly strewn across the pages.’ – *Gerrit Jan Zwier, Leeuwarder Courant*

‘Delicious, hilarious, touching.’ – *Ronald Giphart*

‘Beautiful, fantastic.’ – *Arendo Joustra, chief editor, Elsevier*

‘A book that stimulates your wanderlust and makes the reader forget all about our cold weather.’ – *Pleasure Magazine*

‘Like all travel writers, Dylan van Eijkeren dubs himself a researcher, not a tourist. And yet being a tourist, which he of course is anyway, doesn’t have to be a shortcoming, since he is one with a focus on everyday life, lifting his narrative well above the usual surf and sun indulgences.’ – *De Leeswolf*

### **The press about ‘The Best Country in the World’:**

‘Slapstick prose. (...) Great to devour.’ – *de Volkskrant*

‘An enticing travel book on the lovely Belgium.’ – *De Standaard*

‘A great portret of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, that tries to look beyond the clichés.’ – Yves Desmet, hoofdredacteur *De Morgen*

‘Easy written, often rather funny road story.’ – *NBD Biblion*

‘Betrays the Belgium truth.’ – *Gentleman*

**The press about 'I Saw a Monkey':**

'Van Eijkeren [...] excels in apt and wryly-funny characterizations.' – *NRC Handelsblad*

'By far the best and most amusing book about South Africa published in the Netherlands in recent years.' – *Aktueel*

'Van Eijkeren has a great talent for observation and a subtle pen.' – *Veronica magazine*

'Van Eijkeren's books are a great read.' – *Dagblad van het Noorden*

'Van Eijkeren is in possession of an elegant, and witty pen.' – *Parool*

## Fragment from the book

Letter concerning the most beautiful woman in the world

Honeysuckle Cottage, Mount Nelson Hotel,  
Cape Town, January 2008

Dear Hunter,

Why is it my fate, all over the world, never to be able to quietly enjoy a cup of coffee in the sunshine, but always to be accosted in seedy bars by exotic whores?

Everything was going to be different this time, I decided, and straight away everything was the same. This time I found myself drinking a bottle of Windhoek Lager for a few coppers in the rowdy, arty cafe Jo'burg in Langstraat, while a fat prostitute found it necessary to paw my crotch every time she passed to go to the ladies'.

How come? You tell me ...

And before I could put that elementary and vital question to anyone, a female visitor swung a full bottle of Castle against the forehead of the extremely, really extremely nice girl that was sitting beside me at the bar (and with whom I'd been chatting until that point). Blood immediately spurted from a wound in her eyebrow, splat, onto the bar. The female attacker took flight, ran to the door where she was grabbed by the scruff of the neck by the doorman, who didn't even leave his bar stool. *Gotcha*. I slipped through to the front of the Jo'burg – it wasn't busy there – to the street side. You're either a reporter or you're not.

The doorman kept hold of the young woman, and signalled to the police patrol, whereupon the policemen stepped out of their car (these cars have a holding cage built on as standard). The prisoner turned around, yanked herself free and ran off. I was impressed. She couldn't have been all that bright, but she saw a chance and took it. Fifty metres further on, she was intercepted again by the vehicle of a private security service. The officer overtook her and grabbed her by the arm. I signalled my question to the barmaid, raising my eyebrows: 'Is this normal?'

'They always do that when she's here.'

'Why do you let her in, then?' The jazz band on the little stage had continued playing and segued into – God knows why – 'Son of a Preacher Man'.

No answer was offered to my question; you may ask questions in South Africa, but usually there are no answers to hand.

The barmaid and I staunched the victim's wound with toilet paper; directly in front of the open door, the perpetrator had been brought back to the scene of the crime and was being spoken to by the officer. A few more security types, wearing high-visibility vests, came to look; the woman made another couple of attempts to escape; the blood was eventually staunched with some difficulty; I ordered two Windhoekies – one for the victim and one for me.

That's how it went. There was violence and people got hurt, it was shocking and an affront to fair play, but there was no retribution, redress or revenge – it was, although I didn't know it at the time, typically South African (well, it was of course only a pub fight to begin with).

The victim, and you will like this, turned out to be a Zambian hairdresser called Lili Malenga. She had a great, hearty laugh ('haw-haw', a deep belly laugh) and told me in her dark-brown voice that she was 'vely appy' that I had taken care of her and her wound so well. That leads to fucking, you would have said, and indeed, that's what it does lead to. Although. It didn't come to any fucking at all.

Hairdresser in these parts is synonymous with bar-room whore, and I can assure you that if that's the case, Lili was the most beautiful bar-room whore I ever saw. A cheeky round face, big dark-brown eyes – so dark that you couldn't see any difference between iris and pupil – and long black hair, skin as brown as coffee dregs and as smooth as chicken fillet, a body that was as delicate as it was voluptuous. Stilettos, tight jeans, little black sweater. Not vulgar, but extremely attractive.

How did I find out that Lili was sitting on her assets? My theory is that men beyond a certain age, say thirty-five, can no longer trust in spontaneous female interest in non-European establishments. The spontaneous interest becomes a business interest. My life was great fun until I was thirty-five, a joy ride, but that night I sat in the Jo'burg with a sad feeling. Never again would I have simple contact. A real letdown, if you ask me. So I'd already been half expecting it when Lili had approached me half an hour previously at the bar. She was after my money, or rather after the opportunity offered her by 'the other side', by Europe and my nationality. I can't blame her.

She told me about fleeing from Zambia (which couldn't really have been political, as the situation in Zambia hasn't been that violent recently), her bare existence in Cape Town (a hairdresser with no work permit in a horrible township called Nyanga, four rand a trick), a child, the father of whom she knew for one evening and who lives with her sister in Lusaka. Life expectation in Zambia is 33 years, and 42 in South Africa; in the Netherlands it's 80. Count your blessings.

The bleeding stopped. The barmaid had given me a transparent plaster. I stuck it on Lili's forehead. Then she gave me, very gently, a kiss on the corner of my mouth. To stop myself from laughing, I ordered another two Windhoekies, and in a funny way I felt myself at home. Not at home, but at my ease. I was here, I was nowhere else, and I had no inclination to be anywhere else. That's the most comfortable you can get, on your first evening ten thousand kilometres away from home.

Lili smoked a Peter Stuyvesant Extra Mild. We chatted, and suddenly her hand was on my left thigh, pinching and kneading a little. I wrote her name and telephone number in the back of my dark-blue notebook. I got a kiss on my mouth. Negotiations had started. Two Windhoekies to delay the inevitable. The evening was heading unswervingly towards my making a request. As it stood, the request would be answered in the positive, and then I would be obliged to do something. In a funny way, I wasn't desperately keen. The excitement at the bar was enough for me.

All the same, while there was no need for it, the question naturally slipped out of my mouth two minutes later. Perhaps it seemed appropriate. When she accepted my invitation, I knew for sure. Well, I'm not that sure. I hoped against hope that for once in my life I'd aroused some interest spontaneously. But I hadn't.

'The Mount Nelson', I said.

'The Nelson Mandela!' said Lili. 'A nice hotel.'

‘Do you know it?’ With its prices starting at three hundred euros, I found it a bit steep. It shows how well advanced my self-deceit was, because why would such a beautiful bar hooker never have been in that hotel before? Lili denied ever having been inside it.

I paid the bill and a little later we were walking through Langstraat, a street full of hostels, pubs, restaurants and travel agencies interspersed with bookshops, off-licences and antique shops. Much backpack and flip-flop tourism.

We walked along the huge Windhoek advertisement board at the crossing between Langstraat, Kloofstraat and Oranjestraat, turned into Kloofstraat, up the steep hill in the direction of Table Mountain, heading in the direction of the back entrance to the Mount Nelson. The walk took ten minutes, maybe a quarter of an hour. Lili scraped her steel heels over the doorstep. It was a cheap, but not unsexy sound.

It wasn’t just about the 800 rand, which she immediately asked for at the threshold of Honeysuckle Cottage, or rather it was about that. That 800 rand was everything I hadn’t wanted, what I hadn’t hoped for this evening. I gave her – God knows why, like I was donating to the Heart Foundation – 550 rand. It was all I had on me, and I showed her the door. Whores and me, we’ve never been a happy combination.