

KBP-13

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ONE NOT-QUITE-WHITE HUNTER

A Day in the Country, Afrikaans Style

c/o INCWA

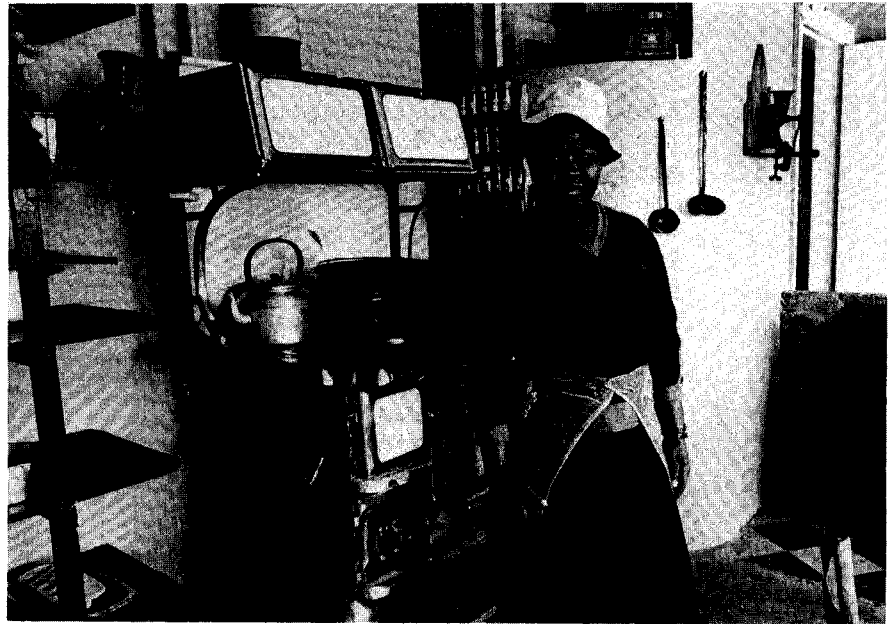
Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

As we climb into the beat-up old Datsun pick-up truck, two cameras are on the seat, one rifle is between my legs, a box of bullets is next to the cameras, and one plastic breadbag full of Crossie's homemade brand of dried meat called biltong is in his left hand. Before Crossie can close the door he is stopped by the voice of Mamasedi, one of the black housewomen who has hurried out of the kitchen, screen door slamming, with something under her arm.

They speak in Sotho for a moment and then Crossie passes me a large Coke bottle that's cold, and wet with condensation and filled with an amber liquid.

"What's this, Crossie?" I ask, wrapping the bottle in my jacket. Crossie's lined and weathered face has an expression of utter, heartfelt pleasure. If it weren't so out of context I would say he looks almost rapturous. It is the expression a mother might have when sur-



Mamasedi the Sotho cook in Free State farm kitchen

prised by an unexpectedly original and considerate act of her child.

Crossie is an Afrikaner who is the farm manager of Chris's farm here in the Orange Free State. This central farming region of South Africa is largely Afrikaner and extremely conservative. No large concentrations of blacks exist within its borders and Indians are legally

Kendal Price is a fellow of the Institute studying the cultures of South Africa, her black homelands, and the bordering African states.

barred from living here. By law, Indians must obtain special permission to spend more than 48 hours in the Orange Free State, and the only blacks allowed are those working for whites.

Chris is an English speaker, but that is not so unusual here. The community on the easternmost edge of the Orange Free State, snuggled in the starkly beautiful mesa region just kilometers from the mountainous independent black state of Lesotho, is mostly English speaking. This probably accounts for the ease with which I was invited to join a group of whites from Mafikeng who were going to visit their friend in the Free State.

Chris owns a farm of approximately one thousand morgen, or two thousand one hundred sixteen acres of land. A considerable amount of it is mountain slope, but there is a good quantity of arable land. Chris cultivates only a small portion of his land, but it is for a high-yield, special-quality asparagus that he exports to Europe. On the slopes of his farm he grazes angora goats. Chris works hard, but he also loves playing polo. Growing asparagus apparently fits in well with the polo season.

Chris told me Crossie was a very good polo player, but Crossie is the farm manager first. The entire operation is overseen by Chris while Crossie manages the labor. Because all of the laborers are black, Crossie spends most of his time with blacks. That is why he speaks Sotho (pronounced soo-too). Why he is so pleased with Mamasedi he will tell me a bit later. We head for the hills. Take off might be a better description.

Cars and trucks built for Africa must be tough because the land is hard and jagged and the men who drive them are crazy. I see no

need to spin the wheels and drive over the ruts at such a speed that we are more off than on the seats, but that is the way Crossie drives. The small pick-up bangs and rattles as we race down the two rock-hard rutted dirt tracks on the farm road, and a huge cloud of dust blots out the entire view behind us. Skidding to a stop in front of a barbed wire gate, Crossie says "I'll be right back, my friend," jumps out, throws open the gate and jumps back in. Everything is done at a breakneck pace, which is both exhilarating and unsettling. At this point I don't know Crossie, and his careening, Kamikaze-style driving is not the most reassuring form of introduction.

Past the gate and we are driving farther and farther straight up the steep, now overgrown tracks that lead up the mountain. I'm just about to ask if we might walk the rest of the way—the earth outside my window is now at about a 45 degree angle—when a small level spot appears and Crossie jams on the brakes. The box of bullets flies off the seat and spills on the floor as I try not to let the cameras hit each other and also try, unsuccessfully, to avoid banging my chin on the rifle barrel.

"Do you always drive like this, or are you doing this for my benefit?" I say to what has become an empty space. Crossie is already out and coming around to my side of the truck wearing a big grin. For me, his smile is just a bit too enthusiastic.

Up to this point my encounters with conservative or rural Afrikaners have left me wary of Afrikaners in general. Only on one previous occasion was I physically threatened, but I have felt unsure of Afrikaners' intentions on enough occasions that I have come to have a basic distrust of them. So from the point several days ago when I arrived, and Crossie suggested I let him show me the mountains, I haven't been sure what to think about the vagueness

of his invitation. On about three different occasions all he said was, "you must let me show you the mountains." He didn't go into details and he didn't push it and it somehow came across as mysterious.

I hand Crossie the rifle and collect the bullets myself. In the mountains in late afternoon it gets cool quickly, so I have worn a heavy chamois-cloth shirt and brought a light jacket. The box of bullets goes in one of the large breast pockets of my shirt, and after entwining the coke bottle in the jacket and tying the arms, it gets draped over one shoulder, under the other arm. Crossie tucks the bag of biltong into his shirt front, slings the rifle over his shoulder and we start up the hill.

It is not very steep at this point but the view is already impressive. These hills are only about 3,000 feet above the valley floor, but the entire region is roughly a mile above sea level, making their real altitude around 8,000 feet. The slopes down the ridgeline are open, rocky, or covered with grass and low shrub brush. From a distance they look like the alpine meadows of Switzerland. The relatively small and reachable peaks make me think of the White Mountains in New Hampshire except that they are a lot less green leading up to the bare rock above timberline. To our backs as we climb are the grand and intriguing mesas. Flattopped and rising directly out of the valley floor, the massive rock protrusions are captivating to look at as the afternoon sunlight hits them nearly on the horizontal. Climbing out of the valley reveals the magnitude and beauty of the place the view from down below obscured.

"I didn't ask Mamasedi for the bottle of wine," Crossie says as we walk, "but she told me that when I

told her I was taking you for a walk on the mountain, she decided to take some of Chris's wine for us. She said you should have some wine for a good walk." Crossie has that look on his face again.

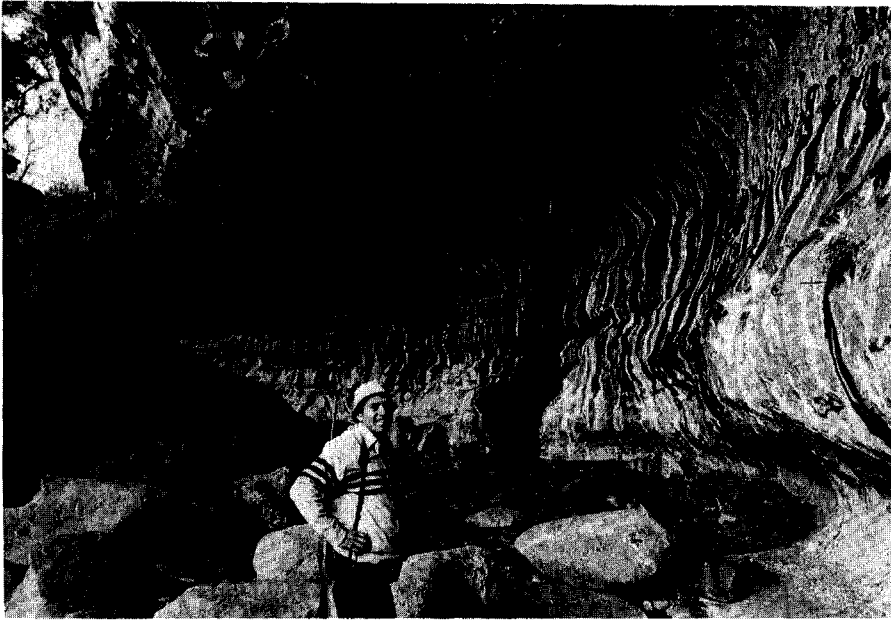
"That was pretty thoughtful," I say, realizing I have misread Crossie. I sometimes forget that politics aside, I am still a visitor from America, and some people feel proud and honored when you allow them to share something with you. That I should have chosen to accept Crossie's invitation to be shown the mountain was an act of friendship that pleased him. That Mamasedi should realize the importance of this outing for Crossie, and risk taking some wine for us from the "master" was a show of respect and kinship that evidently surprised even Crossie. So, the middle-aged Afrikaner farmer has good reason to beam.

He leads me up an ever-thinning path and within minutes we are walking under a huge rock overhang. The graceful and symmetrically curving stone looks like it was scooped out all at once by a giant ice cream dipper instead of eroded by wind and rain over millions of years.

We descend a path heavily overgrown with thin but strong branches and vines, and within moments we are on the edge of a secluded pool. It would be deep enough to swim in if it weren't stagnant.

"The man who owned this before Chris used to have tourists up here to camp out," he says. "Mostly Germans."

I can see the German tourists in their jogging suits, hiking briskly up the hill to spend the night out in the wild African veldt. It must have had a certain appeal; a bit of exhilaration. A few big cats—some lynx or Serval, which are known as tiger cats—still exist up in these hills. The juicy little goats that graze up here are very enticing. On the way up Crossie showed me a cage trap set for a cat to



Afrikaner farm manager shows erosion in Orange Free State

whom Crossie had lost a few of Chris's angoras. (Chris, however, has already explained to me that the most regular threat to the flock are the dogs owned by his black workers. Occasionally, he has to go down to where his black workers live and shoot some of their dogs. He told me he hated doing that because he has a dog himself, but when the workers don't feed the dogs they naturally become predators and have to be destroyed.)

We start uphill again and then we are suddenly in a large grotto with vines, leafy plants, and water dripping off the rocks. A canopy formed by the trees blocks out much of the remaining light above. Finding a dry spot on the rocks, we sit, pull out the biltong and unwrap the bottle of wine. I know I am certainly going to be feeling this wine soon if I have to continue eating Crossie's biltong. It's terrible, and the only way I can get it down is with a shot of wine. It is a lush, private place and as we chew the gamey, homemade biltong and wash

it down with the wine I get the impression Crossie is sharing with me something he holds to be very personal.

As we eat and drink he tells me about growing up on a farm in the Orange Free State and his glory days as a polo player. Somewhat unexpectedly he tells me why he wanted to share this place with me.

"The day you arrived, when you came down the hall and the way you said hello to me I knew you were different and that you were my friend."

"That's real nice of you to say, Crossie. Did you know I was black?"

"I knew you were colored."

"In America, we all consider ourselves to be black."

"Ach, man, you and me, we're brothers."

He grins while nodding his head as if to confirm what he has just said and passes me the wine. I steal a quick glance at it and no, we haven't made even a dent in it, even after two swigs each. The fact that it's not the wine talking is touching. I'm enjoying the outing now and any misgivings are nearly gone.

After a short while it starts to get chilly so we wrap the bottle again, drape everything so we can walk, and start back down the ravine.

Crossie takes me on a short side trip to an impressive, if slightly meager flowing waterfall. He disappears for a minute and reappears midway up the rock face. As he poses for a picture, however, he slips and falls onto his back, my heart clutches during the seconds he is sliding, rifle still in hand, until he manages to stop the plunge. Maybe I simply don't like people to get hurt, or maybe I have already

become attached to my Afrikaner guide, but I'm grateful when that mad moment of helpless panic is over. A few more feet and Crossie would have taken an unchecked 30 foot drop onto solid rock.

Carefully, he climbs back up and returns to the path in the woods; in a minute he has bounded back to my spot at the base of the waterfall.

"I bet you thought I was coming down the short way," Crossie's grin is irrepressible.

"That's what I thought."

"C'mon my friend, we'll go back down a ways and then around. Maybe we can still climb to the top of that peak."

Once out of the brush, Crossie turns to me and asks, "Do you have the bullets?" I nod and hand him the box. He hands me the rifle and proceeds to load the clip with .22 caliber long rifle bullets. While he's doing that I look more closely at the rifle. It is a Mauser made in 1934. The wood stock has been well oiled and the leather sling is smooth and supple.

Crossie takes the rifle, slides in the clip and then points to the rock face about 70 yards away. It's far.

"See where that bird just flew in? Let's see if we can wake him up."

He shoulders the weapon and fires. There is a smacking sound following the shot and a puff of dust appears on the cliff. He squeezes off four more shots as the birds, moving away as they might while looking for food, appear oblivious to the gunshots. It would be pure luck to hit a bird with a .22 from this distance, but judging by how close his shots are together, and how close the group is to where he pointed, he is probably a pretty good marksman.

Crossie hands me the rifle and takes the camera equipment. I fire

off a clip at the spot on the wall and Crossie smiles. "Hey, you're not bad at all." It isn't too stringent a test, but I know I can at least hit the broad side of a barn...or mountain in this case.

After shooting one more clip each we return to the truck and Crossie turns it around and races down the hill. He doesn't stop to close the gate, "the goats are already down" he shouts over the engine noise, and after only a short stretch along the road in the valley he swerves to the right, along the edge of a field, down into a culvert, and back upward, although this time on a much more gradual mountain slope.

Once the truck is parked where it won't roll back, or over—this is still steep country—we organize the things to be carried along, and head up on foot. After forty-five minutes of hiking, switching back fairly often, and pushing or pulling each other up the really steep bits, we have a clear, uncluttered view of the valley. It is nothing short of stunning. Now I understand why Crossie couldn't promote this view to me. If I didn't have the capacity to have a little blind faith in him, I probably wouldn't have the eyes to share this with him. I wouldn't be able to experience what he had brought me up here to experience.

One of the nicer aspects of the climb is Crossie's unspoken acknowledgment that I am in acceptable physical condition. He is a regular mountain goat; smooth, strong, and surefooted—the slip at the waterfall not withstanding—so he had started off quickly. Crossie's an outdoors man, so my ability to shoot reasonably straight and lack of pot belly appears to make a difference with him. Where he had been effusive when we started out, he is now more relaxed.

This valley, as the sun descends for the day, receives a kind of light that I have never seen before. Unlike

being deep in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, where the last direct sunlight you see is hours before it sets on the horizon, here I can see a true late afternoon sun's light low on the hills. In an arc facing east, the ridgeline consists of half a dozen peaks running almost due south. Where the ridgeline stops, the mountains end abruptly, the land dropping straight down to the valley floor. Although the country continuing south is rolling and sloped, there are mesas only, which seem to have jutted from the earth in a random series of eruptions. The country for several hundred kilometers to the west is flat and virtually featureless farmland. The Plaatland.

It is almost like watching the sun set over the ocean, except that there is very little dust in the air above an ocean. Here, because of the general dryness of the region, despite the irrigation, a great quantity of dust is in the air and it produces sunset colors you've only dreamed of. (Unless of course, you've lived in New Jersey where there is so much garbage in the air the sunsets are almost psychedelic.)

So, way down low to the ground, with a remarkably vibrant intensity, the sunlight is splashing onto the mesas, the valley slopes, and the few cirrus clouds in the sky. For a little while the brown hills have turned golden for us.

"We can still go to the top if you want, but it's starting to get dark," Crossie says politely, pointing out the deep shadows that have formed since we began climbing.

"Crossie, whatever you decide."

"Well, it gets dark quickly and the trail is pretty narrow."

"I'm happy to stay here for a while and just enjoy the view."

He thinks for a moment then says, "Let's sit and drink the wine and talk, just you and me."

Of course, there's nobody but he and I up here, but I figure it's his way of saying we'll talk heart-to-heart.

So we sit on the side of the trail, facing the darkening valley as if it is a vast, open campfire dying to its embers, and we talk.

Traveling around America is something he would like to do someday, particularly Texas. He wants to know if I would want to travel with him. I'm thinking, "Oh no, not again," but I say as I always say, "sure, Crossie, I'd travel with you. I've always wanted to see Texas myself." He then offers a King's ransom in terms of what he would pay for, and how it wouldn't cost me anything, just so long as I wanted to travel around with him. It's an offer I've had a number of times while in South Africa. He starts to tell me about his farm in the western Orange Free State and how he's got horses and there's loads of land and how we can go hunting if I visit him.

I am enjoying the view and the wine and the fact that listening to him involves little more than a nod of my head and an occasional positive sounding reply.

"Have you ever hunted any big game?" Crossie asks me.

"No," I say. I've never shot at anything but a few birds, and although I hit a few the one time I did it, that hunting trip didn't turn out too well.

"Would you like to hunt a big animal, say a lion?" Crossie is excited by the mere thought of hunting lion. It is easy to hear the passion it arouses.

"I haven't really ever given it much thought, Crossie," I say while thinking, why would anyone want to kill a lion nowadays, when there are so few left? Perhaps I just don't know much about it, but

I have never heard of hunting lion for the meat. Ever have lion meat stew, or leg of lion? Never.

"It's very exciting going after a beast that is so powerful and dangerous."

"I bet it is," I say nodding.

"A friend of mine owns a private reserve up north. I've shot a lion there."

"Really?" I ease up a bit. A private reserve is a bit different. I know a balance has to be kept. The idea of killing a lion in a game reserve, when there would not be any lions at all without the reserves, is okay. Most of the reserves are too small to support enough wildlife for the proper balance of predators that would eliminate the need for culling. Except perhaps in the Krugar Park, which is over 350 kilometers long and 50 to 100 kilometers wide, few wild animals exist in their natural state.

"When he got caught in the trap it was night-time—"

"A trap?"

"First we shot a kudu and left it for bait—"

"A trap?! You mean you trapped the lion before you shot it?"

"So we drove up, and you could hear it roaring for a long way off."

I realize trapping the lion doesn't strike Crossie as unsporting and I decide this is not the place to try and convince him of my viewpoint on the practice. I also remember that Crossie, an Afrikaans speaker, has repeatedly apologized for his poor English. His English sounds reasonably good to me, but then again, while he may have no trouble with the words he knows, he may not know many of the words he would need to know to express complex thoughts. Either way, although the story seems a bit odd, I listen with interest.



After fall, Crossie sits for picture

"When we drove up and the lion was in the headlights it was very powerful looking." Crossie looks totally absorbed in the tale.

"What happened then?" My mental image of a lion, perhaps trying to pace about but hobbled by its leg in a trap, won't fade. Lions are indeed incredibly powerful looking creatures. Even from the safety of a car, which is the closest I have ever been to one of the big wild cats, there is nothing about them that invites complacency on your part—unless you have never, ever been caused pain by something that lives and breathes. Having any image in your memory of anything or anybody, man or animal, turned suddenly and unexpectedly vicious is enough to make the mere proximity of a lion a memorable occasion. I understand this, but Crossie's story still confuses me.

Perhaps Crossie considers it so obvious you wouldn't call it hunting when you trap a lion and freeze it

in your headlights before shooting it that he didn't even mention it. Everybody has codes and Crossie has already shown he has some of his own. So I prefer to give him the benefit of the doubt on this subject. Even his silly travel talk I'm willing to forget. It is not his fault I have met too many people before him who have also been spoon-fed a load of nonsense about America via "Dallas," and all they want to see is Texas. Also, Crossie had nothing to do with the fact that he's a country guy, and while it means a lot for a country guy to spill his emotions, too many—far too many—whites in Johannesburg literally make a career of it.

"We shot the lion," he says, remembering.

It is getting dark quickly now, and we have finished the wine and Crossie has finished the biltong. A solid chill has come into the air so it feels good to stand up and move our arms and legs. This time when Crossie moves off quickly I am with him out of total enjoyment. I love running downhill. Well, it isn't quite running. We walk fast, jog occasionally, jump over a few small ledges, and when we get to the meadow just above the truck for the last hundred meters we break into an open run.

Once at the truck Crossie starts it up, switches on the headlights, and we go barreling down the mountainside, back down through the culvert, and up onto the road on the edge of the unplowed field.

Crossie is saying something and I am straining to hear him over the engine and rattling of the truck when he suddenly swerves right and off the road. The turn throws me against the door (the cars are right hand drive here), and the jolting and rocking from driving at speed over the hardened ruts of an

asparagus field makes me feel like I'm in a paint mixer. Everything seems to be trying to hit me in the face, the cameras, the rifle, the empty coke bottle that was in my lap, even the windshield when Crossie slams on the brakes with the same suddenness of the turn.

"Whoa, Crossie! What's up?"

"Rabbit." He points forward into the darkness. About 20 meters in front of us, just about at the farthest reach of the headlights in the angle the truck has come to a stop, is a rabbit.

"Go ahead, shoot it," says Crossie, grinning. The outing is complete; he has even gotten me some game to hunt. It's pretty small game, and shooting at it while it's mesmerized by the headlights isn't exactly tramping through the bush giving your prey a fair chance, but Crossie is extremely pleased nonetheless. Me, I don't have much of an opinion on it either way. I mean, it's not a lion sitting there wondering what all this bright light is about.

I sit for a moment. The rabbit is still there. Crossie says, "go ahead, take a shot."

Why not, I say, rabbit's good eating. I open the door and climb out. Standing on the uneven ground beside the truck I raise the rifle to my shoulder and take aim.

Now here is where the wine starts talking. I must have ten pounds of junk hanging around my neck and another five stuffed in the front pockets. Yet I don't even think to lean up against the truck or drop to one knee to steady myself. Nope, Daniel Boone here just cocks the bolt back, aims about an inch above the rabbit's head to compensate for the arc, (the what?! In twenty yards that bullet ain't gonna drop no more 'an a rabbit's hair, you dodo), and squeeze the trigger.

Click. No bullets.

"I say, Crossie, there are no bullets in this rifle."

"Damn," Crossie says. "Give me the clip." He slides across the seat and takes it from my hand. A moment later he hands it back full.

I load it, cock it, raise the rifle to my shoulder and squeeze off a shot. Directly behind the rabbit there's a kick of dust. The rabbit sits, watching us.

"Go ahead, take another shot."

I lower my aim slightly and squeeze off another shot. The rabbit stands. Not showing great hunting acumen, I too continue to stand.

"You're just above his head," Crossie shakes his. "Right between the ears."

I fire again. Another puff of dust appears. This is an expensive way to plow a field. The rabbit looks bored. Or am I misreading the rabbit too. Perhaps he's already resigned himself to ignominious death on a field of asparagus, and I'm being cruel by dragging this out. I take another shot. Crossie is grinning that wild grin and having a fit. "Just above his head again."

Last shot and you guessed it. Rabbit, 5; your Fellow, 0. I express an unprintable physical act and lower the Mauser. It looks like just vegetables tonight.

Crossie slaps his hand on his thigh, chuckling. Either because of that sound or because the rabbit wants to get away from the terrific breeze passing just above his head, but he meanders off into the darkness. I figure that's about it for "Huntin' wabbit" to quote another great hunter, but Crossie puts the pick-up in gear, and with the doors open—and me standing in the field with the rifle—bounces off after the rabbit. Not fifty meters later he

traps the rabbit in his lights again. I walk over to the truck and hand him the rifle.

"This one's yours, Crossie." I'm not really disgusted with myself, but I had my chance. If I couldn't hit him with five shots then I don't deserve to get him.

Crossie reloads the rifle, drops to one knee and leans against the truck. I take note. He aims and fires once...and misses. No dust can be seen



Mesas in distance, farmland center, Crossie on left

because he is shooting from a much lower angle than I was. A second shot misses. Crossie fires off a third shot and the rabbit is catapulted upwards and back, cartwheeling two or three times head over tail before it falls back to the ground.

I give Crossie a round of applause as he trots into the field and then walks back holding the rabbit up and smiling broadly. The eight shot rabbit.

The rabbit gets tossed into the back of the pick-up, we climb into the cab, and Crossie takes off across the

the field vowing to find me another rabbit to shoot at.

"But I had my chance, Crossie. I missed it."

He ignores my comment. "Keep your eyes on the edge of the field. There's usually rabbits here in the evening."

Well, there may be rabbits around here in the evening most of the time, but after all the noise we've been making I would be surprised if we could find rabbit droppings. Crossie, however, is kind of funny about it and keeps driving around the field promising he'll find a rabbit for me to shoot. I finally manage to convince him that one rabbit is a pretty good take for the day seeing how we hadn't been hunting for anything in the first place. So we drive back to the edge of the field, onto the road running down through the woods and back up the steep rain-rutted road to the large stone farmhouse.

When we get to the kitchen and Crossie has laid the rabbit on the counter he turns to me quite serious.

"I want you to have the rabbit."

"Really, Crossie?" I was hoping he might offer it but I felt a bit guilty about the desire because I could tell he also wanted it.

"Yes, please, I want you to have it."

He has shared a lot with me today. Even if some of it has caused mixed feelings in me, I don't doubt his sincerity now.

"You sure, Crossie?"

"Yes, my friend. I want you to have the rabbit we shot."

I know the "we" is not a mistake in his English. It is time to accept graciously.

"Thanks, Crossie. We shake hands and he excuses himself. It is time for him to head off. He is less

relaxed now that we are in the house. Crossie the farm manager has breakfast with Chris the owner because that is where they discuss what is to be done during the day. But dinner is social, and at least during my visit, when Chris has guests for dinner, the farm manager is not one of them.

The rabbit is not in on dinner this night either, except as a slightly stiff spectator from the counter next to the sink.

The next day rabbit and I trek 900 k's west back to Mafikeng, where he goes in the Frigidaire freezer and I reacclimate to the bushveldt heat. About a week later one seasoned journalist by the name of Barbara Bright, who has been game enough to come to South Africa and travel with one barely seasoned young correspondent, is served one not-too-gamey, but very tasty genuinely wild, suicidal South African rabbit.

I tell Barbara only that I have obtained the rabbit in the Orange Free State. Details of the hunt are left vague for obvious reasons. Anyway, as they say, only your white hunter knows for sure.

Sincerely,

