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## TWO BRICKS AND A TICKEY HIGH

But Jonathan Livingston Seagull was not a common bird  
... more than anything he loved to fly.

—Richard Bach

**I** GREW UP AT THE BOTTOM of Africa in a small town with a big name, a juxtaposition of the names of the two men who first settled there. The men were called Piet Retief and Gert Maritz; they named their settlement Pietermaritzburg.

The town is nestled among the rolling hills of the Natal Province of South Africa, midway between the Drakensberg Mountains and the Indian Ocean. It used to be an orderly town with soft edges, but the soft edges are gone now, eroded by time and the turbulent changes that swept the country over the past two decades. Where the hillsides were once green and covered with wild flowers, they are now red mud, laid bare by too many people living on too little land. Even the smell is different. The fragrance of jacaranda blossom has given way to exhaust fumes and cooking fires.

It's an area steeped in history, the nearby hills once the scene of furious battles between the Boers and the Zulus and the soil to this day remains stained with the blood of thousands of men who died for the love of their country. Great struggles with descriptive names like the Battle of Blood River and the Battle of Isandhlwana took place where cows now graze peacefully in the shade of acacia trees, and the Ncome River, once red with blood, gurgles peacefully in the hot afternoon sun. The Zulus were beaten into submission only to rise again with political power to reclaim their land, and the air of British colonialism that permeated all parts of life is long gone, replaced by the rough and tumble of a struggling Third World city.

It wasn't always that way, it never is. When I was small, the streets were safe and the town claimed the unofficial title of being the 'Last Outpost of the British Empire'. We even used British currency, a tickey (two and a half cents) or a sixpence (five cents) could buy you a handful of sweets at the corner store and small boys, like myself, were, well, just two bricks and a tickey high.

At times Pietermaritzburg seemed more English than England, as expatriates clung to traditions long since given up back home, but treasured as fond memories in Africa. During the summer we dressed in white and played cricket, while our parents also dressed in white and went lawn bowling. In the winter it was rugby, whether we liked it or not, and I did not. I was too small to be of any use on the field, and not much of a team player. I was more interested in boats. I longed for the weekends when I could go sailing. I longed to leave the routine of school and work and slip away to the familiar surroundings of the waterfront. The smell and sound of the lake immediately erased all the muddle and mess and stress of growing up. The moment I set sail it was washed away, replaced by the slap, slap of clear water on the hull. I knew from an early age that my life would be tied to the water, and early seeds of adventure were planted in my resolve.

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I was the fourth of five children. My sister came first, the apple of my father's eye, followed by two older brothers, me, and then a younger brother.

My father was a civil engineer, my mother a homemaker in the days when that was what women did. For a while before we were born she worked in a chemist rolling pills by hand but as far as I know that was the only paid job she had. It was a barefoot childhood and we ran free, watched occasionally by a maid, but mostly left to our own devices to let our imaginations take us to faraway places and our bicycles to more practical destinations like the woods or corner store.

My earliest memory is of a short flight. I was four. I remember the take off, and I remember the landing. The bit in-between has gone but then it was a very short flight—less than a second, actually. I launched myself off the verandah wall with a vague belief that a positive attitude and a bit of luck would seem to come down safely. I had makeshift wings strapped to my arms. The second my feet left the wall I discovered the undeniable effects of gravity, and dropped like a stone breaking my ankle and skinning my knee. It was the first of many visits to the emergency room and I can still recall the sterile smell of disinfectant burning my nostrils while I waited for the cast to be molded, and I remember being given the heel-guard to keep as a souvenir when the cast was cut off three weeks later. I had healed quickly and was sent back into the world to see what new damage I could inflict upon myself. It didn't take long.

During the winter we would visit my grandmother for lunch. You could smell the roast beef from the parking lot outside her small flat. With ice cream and chocolate sauce for dessert, it was worth getting dressed in our best clothes and sitting through a few hours of adult conversation. One Sunday, not long after I had regained full use of my broken leg, I ran headlong into my father's car cracking my head open on the rear bumper. I do not remember much beyond the initial impact. I do know that I ruined my best clothes and lunch at grandma's, and recall that increasingly familiar smell of disinfectant.

Some time passed before I inflicted more damage. Like most middle-class families, we did not own a swimming pool and instead would visit the public pool. One day I decided that diving was going to be my forte and spent the morning perfecting my somersaults and swan dives. By lunchtime I had them mastered, and decided to seek out a new challenge. A simple back-flip. I positioned myself on the edge facing away from the water, and

shuffled backwards until my toes were clinging to the lip. My heels hung over the water and I balanced for a moment building up courage. I hesitated a second and then leapt into the air. I sprang upwards, arched my back and crash-landed right where my feet had been. For a split second I teetered on the edge, my head flattened against the hard cement, and then in slow motion collapsed into the pool in a bloody heap. The water around me had turned crimson mingling with the turquoise pool water before someone grabbed my arm, yanked me out, and took me back to that same emergency room.

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Our family home was a sprawling single story structure designed to combat the hot summer days. We had no air conditioning; instead large windows allowed the afternoon breeze to blow through the house. A massive verandah around three quarters of the home provided an overhang that stopped the sun from beaming directly into the bedrooms. On summer nights we would drag our beds out onto the verandah and sleep in the cool evening air listening to the sounds of crickets and night frogs. My father would stop by each of us in turn to say good night and he would fan us with the sheets until we were cool and could fall asleep.

I especially loved it when it rained. Some nights we would hear the far off rumble of thunder as the storm grew closer, and slowly it would descend on the town bringing with it bolts of lightning that would instantly bathe everything in stark white light like an overexposed photograph. The rain would bucket down on the tin roof creating a din that made it impossible to sleep. Instead we would cower under our sheets, all of us children awake and watching. We were dry and safe under the overhang but the cascading rain sent up a fine mist as it pounded the verandah wall and our beds were damp. Once the storm had moved off we would go back to sleep and wake the next morning to a world washed clean.

The summer afternoon storms were especially violent. The heat of the day would simmer and smolder until the sky turned an angry bruised blue and the wind dropped to an eerie stillness. We would hear the thunder start, the storm gathering strength on the hot plains outside the city and then it

would get so dark that the streetlights came on automatically. Sometimes with the rain and thunder came hail, the white pellets of ice pounding down on the tin roof and bouncing off the green grass. My mother would gather us inside, away from any window - we were told that glass attracted lightning - and we watched as the storm passed overhead. As quickly as it had started, the rain ended, the streetlights went off and the sun came out again. Often, just as the rain was tapering off there would be a 'monkey's wedding' when the sun was out while it was still raining. Flying ants would emerge from their underground tunnels and fill the sky, collecting around any light in thick swarms. We would shut off all lights in the house so that we did not attract them inside and watch as the streetlights were almost dimmed by the mass of delicate wings and tiny bodies that, I was told, tasted like butter when fried in hot oil.

At the end of our garden there were mulberry and loquat trees that hung heavy with fruit and our mouths, hands and clothes were constantly stained with black and red juice. Beyond the trees was a private all-boys school that was part regular school, part reformatory school and part agricultural college. Between our home and the school buildings was a field of corn with a series of chicken coops at the far end. A fierce looking dog leashed to a long length of wire strung between two trees stood guard. The dog was able to patrol a hundred yards or so tethered to the wire, making it a challenge for us small kids to swipe the eggs. We were, however, not above a challenge and it was great fun to try and outsmart the dog. We would creep slowly through the corn until we could peer out and spot the dog. It was always tricky because we had no idea if he would be right there where we exited the corn, or at the far end of the wire. Sometimes he would hear us before we saw him and charge barking and spraying slobber while we scampered back to the house laughing that nervous laughter children have when they are not sure if it's really funny or really scary, or both.

If the dog was at the far end of the wire we knew that we had twenty seconds or so to make the gap between the corn and coops, grab a few eggs and scadaddle back into the relative safety of the corn field. Sometimes, of course, the dog was asleep and we tiptoed across no-mans-land until we reached the chickens. I would push up a small door, reach my arms into the soft warm down and feel around for eggs. I would hear

the mother hen cluck and complain until my hand rested on a freshly laid egg and would quickly grab as many as I could filling my shirt with treasure. We would tiptoe back to the corn and then run laughing to the house where my Mom would scramble the eggs and serve them with fresh bread.

Pete, my oldest brother, had a way with animals. He seemed to exert a certain pull on them and one day he spoke his thoughts out loud: "I am sure that dog is not as fierce as he thinks he is." I could see that he was scheming something and I knew that he was going to drag me into it. He always did and there was no way I could get out of it. A few years later this magnetic pull would lead us both into a mountain of trouble, but that was in the future.

"Come on," he said, "let's go and get some eggs. I am going to see if I can pet the dog." I felt my heart sink. Once Pete had an idea in his head there was no stopping him. I followed him through the gap in our fence to the cornfield, and trailed slowly behind him toward the chicken coops. We peered out through the corn and saw that the dog was asleep just feet from where we were. "Let's go back," I said to Pete. "If the dog suddenly wakes up he's gonna be mad." Even as I said the words I knew it was no use. Pete crouched down and bit by bit edged toward the sleeping dog. "Come on," he said beckoning me. I could feel rivers of sweat running down my back but I did as I was told and followed silently.

Pete made a soft clicking noise and I saw the dog lazily lift an ear. Pete clicked again and the ear flopped in response. Pete whistled a low whistle and clicked his tongue. I could see the dog starting to wake up and fought the urge to run. We had been his mortal enemy the whole summer; why would he suddenly want to be friends? Pete clicked again and the dog opened one eye. Even at six years old I could read the expression in his one open eye. The dog look straight at us hardly believing what he was seeing. Then he opened the other eye and emanated a low growl. The noise started somewhere deep within him. Pete clicked and looked directly at the dog. The dog growled again and it looked as if it was going to rise. "Don't move," Pete ordered. He whistled a low whistle and reached out his hand. By now the dog had both eyes firmly fixed on us but he still didn't move. Pete edged a bit closer and the dog growled again. We were

less than three feet from it. I could smell his breath and see scars on his back from many hard encounters. Up close he looked twice the size but, strangely, not as scary as he did from a distance.

Pete sat quietly on the ground talking to the dog in a low, soothing tone. The growling stopped. The dog put its head on the ground and looked up, his expression softening and then, surprisingly, he whimpered. This fierce dog, our sworn enemy, the Militant Guard of Chicken Coops, was whimpering. Pete reached out his hand ever so slowly and the dog schooched forward, his belly dragging in the dirt, his tail thumping from side to side, kicking up dust. He looked directly at Pete, ignored me, and began licking Pete's fingers. Pete tussled him behind the ears and before long the dog rolled over onto his back aching to have his tummy scratched. So much for savagery. All the dog really wanted was a good petting and I learned the first of many valuable lessons about life. Most of us just want our bellies scratched; the fierce exterior is all show.

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We always had a variety of animals living with us, not all of them domestic. Pete would rescue them and bring them home. One time I won a tiny chicken at some fair and brought it home. The chicken ran free in the yard growing daily until it was large, fat, and big enough to scare off stray dogs. For a while we had a big black crow as a permanent resident. Pete made a perch for him in his bedroom on top of his cupboard and the crow, who loved Pete and hated the rest of us, would lord over the room as if he owned not only the house, but the whole neighborhood. The arrangement worked okay except when Pete went away for a night. He would order me to sleep in his bed so that I could let the crow out in the morning. I knew better than to argue and would creep quietly into his bed once I was sure that the crow was asleep. I never did sleep; I was terrified and would lie half awake with one eye fixed on the crow. Sometime before dawn I would finally give in and fall asleep and no sooner than I did, the crow would dive bomb. He would kick off from his perch, swoop down and land squarely on my stomach, his long, black, razor sharp beak inches from my face. Inevitably I screamed and in defense rolled over to protect

my face but the crow knew no mercy. It would hop onto my head pecking at my ears until I escaped its clutches and let him out the door.

I hated the crow but liked the snakes and the legavaan. Pete always had a fish tank filled with a few varieties of snakes and inevitably one or more of them would escape. The only poisonous one he kept was a Red-lipped Herald, a smallish snake, quite pretty, but with a venomous bite that wouldn't kill but could make you sick if it bit you often enough. It was this snake that kept escaping and for days I would gingerly pull back my sheets and search under my pillow before getting into bed. It was usually the maid who found the snake; the maid who hated snakes and regarded them as pure evil. There was something about the smell of freshly laundered clothes that attracted the snake and it would slide into our cupboard and sleep between layers of T-shirts. It never bit anyone but could give a good scare when you reached for a shirt and found two feet of snake resting comfortably on your swimming trunks.

The legavaan, a small crocodile-like reptile about three feet long, was fun to keep but not to catch. We caught them on the banks of the river near the house. Pete would decide that he wanted a new pet and would round me up to help him catch them. They lived in the narrow crevices of mud and rock banks, usually in places too tight for his arms. Being half his age my arms were skinny, perfect for sliding into the narrow gaps. First we had to cross the Field of Dangerous Donkeys. I am not sure who owned the donkeys but we were told that they were dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. Surprisingly Pete never tried his animal charm on them; instead we crept as quietly and inconspicuously as we could until we were close enough to bolt for the far fence before the donkeys saw us. They never took up chase. I guess, looking back on it, they too just wanted their bellies scratched and running after small boys was altogether too much effort.

Once over the fence we were safe and a few minutes later at the river's edge. We often played at the river loading up "bendy" sticks with sticky red mud and flinging it at each other. It was called "kleilat" and provided endless hours of free fun for neighborhoods of children. Our parents had no idea where we were until we came back home with mud caked hard in our hair and our clothes stained a terracotta red. This was when

we first saw the legavaan and about the same time Pete decided that he wanted one for a pet.

If you looked carefully in the cracks you could see a glint of color, the brown and yellow scales of the legavaan's body. The problem was that you were not sure what part of its body you were looking at. If it was near the tail you were OK to reach in and try and get a grip on it. If it was near the head you were only a few inches from razor sharp teeth. That was the reason Pete brought me along. "Don't worry," he would say. "Just reach in and grab it quick. You need to surprise it so move quickly." It was only two decades later when Pete had me reach into a bees nest to extract the honey that I decided to put my foot down and refuse, but when I was small it was just the way it was. Pete ordered and I followed.

I would try and poke the legavaan to get some idea of where the teeth were while Pete stood back a safe distance with an old sack at the ready. In the end I would give up, take my chances and make a grab for it. Sometimes the legavaan scurried away but often I was able to get a good grip on its muscular tail and pull like mad. The surprised and much annoyed legavaan would dig its claws into the banks and hold on for dear life while Pete and I pulled until it came out hissing and arching its body in an effort to bite us. In seconds we had the sack open and the writhing lizard stuffed inside. Once back home we would drop it into a wire cage and, slowly working his magic, Pete would befriend it.

Feeding time was always great fun. During the week we would hunt small lizards, shooting them down with an elastic band. If we hit them just right they would drop from the roof where they had been hanging upside down, and while they were still stunned we would make a grab for them. Holding the squirming lizard between thumb and forefinger I would delicately drop the lizard into the snake cage and watch what happened. The lizard knew he was in trouble the instant his soft padded feet hit the dirt. It stood motionless until the snake got wind of fresh food, its forked tongue licking back and forth tasting the air. Slowly the snake would make its way toward the lizard staring at it with ice cold dark eyes. The lizard would be transfixed; frozen; terrified. We would watch with rapt fascination until the snake struck, slamming into the horrified creature, killing it instantly.

On Saturday mornings we would talk our mother into taking us to the local pet store where we could buy white mice for ten cents apiece. The poor, frightened mouse would scurry around in the paper bag oblivious of its fate until it was tipped out of the bag into the snake pit. Small boys know no mercy and we watched gleefully as the mouse huddled shaking in the corner until one of the snakes took the scent. Lizards show no emotion, their faces expressionless, but white mice are a different thing. Their faces showed sheer terror, their whiskers quivering and their tiny bodies shaking. We loved it and the snake, like us, showed no mercy. It was a one-way ticket for the poor mouse.

We would hunt for frogs in the river and bring them back for the legavaan. There was nothing sinister about the way a legavaan killed its prey. It would ease slowly forward, its scaly body barely scraping the dirt until it was within striking distance of the silly frog who, all too late, realized that it was in deep trouble. I don't know how many times I looked at the expressionless eyes of a half eaten frog as the legavaan's teeth sank into its soft belly and sucked it down. The frogs, unlike mice, seemed totally unfazed by the whole experience.

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Our summer holidays were spent at the beach, the mountains or at one of South Africa's many game parks. I loved the beach holidays the best. My Dad would pack the station wagon with enough food and booze for two weeks, load in five children, two dogs and the maid, and we would set off for the coast. This was in the days before air conditioning and my Mom would sit up front and chain smoke while we sat jammed in the back seat. We were barely out the driveway when someone poked someone in the ribs and things started to go downhill. I could see Dad's knuckles tighten on the steering wheel and every now and then he would lean back and take a swipe at us, hoping to connect with anyone, it didn't matter who. Years later Dad complained of tennis elbow even though he never set foot on a tennis court.

The beach cottage was a stone's throw from tumbling surf that washed up on golden sand. Once free from the car, we would rush down to the

water's edge and plunge in. It was paradise. Hundreds of rock pools were filled with all kinds of creatures, some edible, some not. We would gather muscles from the rocks and Mom would steam them in a big pot until they broke open revealing their soft, pink flesh that tasted of the ocean. If we were lucky we would be at the beach cottage during a sardine run. Every so often during the summer, tens of thousands of sardines would be chased up the coast by the larger game fish. It was a feeding frenzy and we would run to the ocean with buckets. There were so many sardines that you only had to dip the bucket into the water and you had a half dozen squirming, shining fish that were all attempting to leap out. Dad would make a large open fire and gut the sardines before tossing them on the coals and coating them with coarse salt. A freshly grilled sardine with a squeeze of lemon was about as good as food could get. The only meal I remember being better than a plate full of sardines was the time my uncle came for a visit. He brought a large chicken that Mom cooked slowly in a pot with some fresh herbs. It was only years later that I found out it was the same once-tiny chick that I had won at the fair.

With all that good eating and fresh air I was growing and one day, after a long, hot summer, Mom bundled me into the back of her car and we took off for town. "Where are we going?" I asked, and my mother smiled. "You are a big boy now," she said. "Next week you are going to start school. We need to buy you a school uniform and get you some books." I was not thrilled by the news. School meant work and no time for play. School meant that my carefree life was coming to an end. I hated the thought of it but life has its milestones and I was about to face my first.