

How to Exit Gracefully from a Hammock (by Charlotte Otter)

Hot white stones describe a path from a sandy car-park - now empty - to a low-slung office building. Set about with frangipani trees whose yellow and white blossoms decorate the summer grass, the office is the headquarters of Ramsay Van der Velde, owner of Van der Velde's Caravan Park. He is a tired man. The Christmas holiday season is over - the punters have packed up their trailers with their Gauteng number plates, their bronzed wives and swearing children, and headed back into the hinterland where they belong.

Van der Velde, "Ramsay" to his friends, "Mr V" to the punters, "boss" to his staff, scratches his opulent, tanned, hairy belly (in summer he doesn't do with shirts), leans back in his office chair and sighs, with relief, but also with pride. It had been another great season at Van der Velde's - a full park for two months, great business at the cafe in Cokes, braai coals and milk, the night cricket matches had gone down well, the discos had been worth the trouble and the little kiddies had loved the new midnight treasure hunt along the shores of the lagoon.

Van der Velde gets up from his chair, moves over to a small knee-high fridge, gets out his bottle of whiskey and pours himself his evening drink. Richly deserved, he tells himself, richly deserved. He stands in the door of his office, which, with its back bedroom has now become his home too and surveys his kingdom. Tomorrow when the staff come in, they'll begin the big mop-up operation - emptying the bins, mowing the lawns, swabbing down the ablutes, pruning the oleanders. Despite the mess, it looks good to him. He's built it, after all, built it all from nothing. Tonight his eyes light on the frangipani trees rather than the litter; he chooses to smell their sweet scent rather than the pong from the men's loos.

With the ice in his drink clinking pleasantly, he walks down the path through now-emptied sites, noting but not saddened by braai fire burns on the grass and the empties stacked haphazardly against the overflowing bins. At the end of the path are his ten permanents - caravans that he rents out either long-term or seasonally. At the moment, five are still full, four with summer fishermen who don't have to rush back to Johannesburg or Bloemfontein in time for the new school term. His goal is the fifth and last caravan.

This is placed slightly higher than the rest, with a view of the lagoon, the brick railway bridge (almost disused except for one daily freight train) and a curve of beach with a sturdy collection of rocks at the sea's edge. Van der Velde stops to admire the view. "Best damn view on the whole South Coast," he tells himself, not for the first time.

He's always wanted to have this site for himself. But, because of the view, this one's always taken. There are two gnarled frangipanis between this site and the next (where the view's good, but not as good), and he's always imagined hanging a hammock between them and spending lazy days in the shade. When you're busy all day and all night keeping punters happy, taking deliveries, running the cafe, arranging entertainment for all ages, there's just no time to lurk in a hammock.

"You're going to tell me it's the best damn view on the South Coast, aren't you?" says a voice.

“Damn right, I am, Evie,” says Van der Velde, turning to smile at his friend and permanent customer who is sitting on a faded deck-chair under the awning of her caravan, holding a green beer bottle.

Small, brown and scrawny to his large, brown and beefy, she pats the twin chair next to hers. He sits with a sigh, they clink drinks and sip.

“Good season, hey Ramsay?” she asks.

“A fine season, Evie, damn fine.” He scratches his ample belly with satisfaction. A belly scratch can mean many things and tonight it disguises worry. He’s always been grateful for his bulk and height. Unlike smaller men, he doesn’t need to lash people with invective. He never has to use his fists. When he stretches to his full height, obstreperous teenage drunks and recalcitrant staff immediately fall into line. As a result, he is contented and likes to scratch.

“And it’s empty now,” Evie says. “Just as we like it.”

“Ja, but there’s no rest for the wicked, Evie. We’ve got to tidy up this bloody mess tomorrow.”

“We” means Van der Velde will issue directions, while his staff, men and women from the local village, ably led by his foreman Bongani, will clean up the bloody mess. Back in the old days, when Sadie - Van der Velde’s beloved wife - was still alive, they would muck in too. Sadie had had high standards and had not trusted “the blacks” enough to let them do all the work. Before things became really bad, she had kept the gardens shipshape herself, getting up early to pull weeds and water beds before opening the cafe for those who needed their breakfast milk and eggs. She’d expected him to get his hands dirty too. Now, older and tired, he was quite happy to oversee the work.

While Sadie was the organiser, his special touch is the human one. As each new family arrives for the Christmas season, he learns all their names and remembers them. This year, he noticed that the oldies were getting edgy as the beach grew too hot for them, so he set up the eleven o’ clock Bingo Drive in his new rec room to keep them happy. His night cricket matches and treasure hunts are relished by kids and parents alike, while his discos are renowned along the whole South Coast. When he’d hired the famous Amanzimtoti DJ Mooi Boy for the latest New Year’s Eve party he’d also had to bring in bouncers from Scottburgh to keep the crowds of teenagers under control. Van der Velde’s is the spot.

And he is buggered, bloody buggered. Each season takes more out of him, and now he looks forward to some downtime before the Easter holiday madness began. He looks at Evie’s caravan, the grey duiker skull she’s hung on the door, her silver driftwood, shell and feather mobiles that hang from the awning. He’d like to spend the day here, just sitting watching the view, listening to the mobiles chink, breathing the air. He sighs and twists his sweating glass.

“Penny for them?” says Evie.

“Ag, Evie, I’m worried,” Van der Velde confesses. “I can’t do another season like this. It’s going to kill me, man.”

“You want to sell the park?”

“Not really, but who can I leave it to? I mean, the girls have their own lives. They don't want a bloody caravan park.”

His daughters Ellen and Lorraine are both busy Durban housewives, married to golfing executives. Their lives are full of children's sports days, swimming lessons and weekends in the Berg. Neither of them are interested in Van der Velde's Caravan Park and his two sons-in-law even less so. When it's time for him to pack up, they'd like him to sell, install himself in a Durban old-age home, maybe take up bowls and be around to admire their children's sporting prowess.

“You want me to ask Sadie what she thinks?” Evie looks at him.

Ramsay's gut churns. For a minute, he expects to see Sadie walking down the path towards them. Then he realises what Evie is offering. He knows she does “readings”. He's allowed her to put up a small ad in the cafe, and has noticed a steady trickle of women making their way to Evie's site. But he is a practical man; he doesn't hold with hocus-pocus. Astrology, reincarnation, crystals: all that stuff is as unreal to him as fairies at the bottom of the garden. He looks back at his friend, who is still regarding him neutrally.

“Well?”

“Yes,” he says quietly, draining his glass.

Evie stands. She's really like a pixie herself, he thinks, with her snow-white hair, brown skinny legs and a grin always dancing in her eyes.

“Give me a minute to get myself organised,” she says, “then come inside.”

She walks through the open door of the caravan, tinkling strands of seashells that hang there as she goes. He breathes, loudly. He's nervous, like a schoolboy getting up the courage to phone a girl for the first time. He looks again at the view, then stands.

Inside Evie's sitting on a chair in the small sitting/dining-room. On a low table in front of her are a glass of water, a box of tissues and a small framed picture of a man. She gestures for him to sit on the hard sofa bench opposite her.

“The water's for you,” she says. “So are the tissues. This is my guide. His name is Carlos. I have known him for twelve years and I trust him completely. He operates from a position of love. Now, I will take a few minutes to connect with him. Please keep silent while I do and use the time to think of Sadie - it will help us to contact her if you do.”

She closes her eyes. Van der Velde looks around the room and then also shuts his eyes. For some reason, he thinks of Sadie in the old house that he has now turned into a recreation room for rainy days, with table tennis, a pool table, darts, some shelves of books and puzzles. She is sitting in the bath, shaving her legs and shouting something to him about a delivery of ice-cream that he needs to go and meet. Then he remembers her in hospital, small, full of tubes and dying.

“Carlos is coming through,” he hears Evie say. He opens his eyes, but hers remain closed. Her voice has changed, it’s now more resonant, not exactly loud, but deeper and filling the small space. She speaks slowly, with frequent pauses as though she is listening to someone else in another room.

“Carlos greets you. He welcomes you as a beloved son. He says you are greatly loved. You are known as a kind man. You have many friends. Your family love you, your children and grandchildren, brothers and sisters. But no-one really knows who you are. Carlos asks do you know who you are, beloved son?”

Van der Velde is startled as his throat starts to ache.

“You spend your time caring for others, making things good for everyone else. But Carlos says who’s looking after Ramsey? Beloved son, he says, you too deserve kindness. There has not been enough kindness in your life. You need to learn to be kind to yourself.”

He coughs, and is amazed as an intense sensation start to spread through his body from his head, melting to his toes. It’s acute, as if his skin is fizzing.

“You love people. You make people happy. But Carlos says you need to learn how to make yourself happy. Carlos says maybe the time to leave the holiday camp has come. Maybe it’s time for Ramsay to join the real world. The real world needs Ramsay.”

He’s uncomfortable. His body itches. He wants to scratch all over.

“Carlos is making Ramsay discomfoted. Well who else is going to? All around Ramsay are people who say ‘yes, Ramsay, no, Ramsay’. Others say ‘Oh Daddy’ and pat Ramsay as if he were a big bear. Are you a big bear, Ramsay? No, you are a man. You are getting older and you feel yourself to be very tired, but you are still a man. Carlos says this man needs a new interest in life. Carlos says this man is not ready to put up his feet and watch his grandchildren play cricket.”

Van der Velde smiles. Two of his grandsons are great little cricketers. Watching them play is one of his joys in life. But he knows that retiring now would be death by boredom.

“Carlos says, does Ramsay have any questions so far. Carlos says please ask.”

He clears his throat. He feels like an idiot, but he asks, “If I should leave the caravan park, but not retire, what should I do?”

“My son, you have a special experience, do you not? You know what it is like to be with someone with a problem. Can you not help others with the same problem? So many people with this problem, so many people who need help. Carlos says with your kind heart, and your goodness to people, you could help the families.”

The fizzing sensation intensifies. Now he feels as if the top of his head is open, like a sponge. To his horror, tears come into his eyes. He reaches for a tissue.

“You are moved. Well of course you are. You struggled with your wife’s problem for many, many years. You helped her. Everyone helped her. But Carlos says who helped Ramsay? You felt alone, scared, helpless. You did your best, but in the end your best was not

enough. Her illness was too bad for you to do anything. She killed herself slowly and you had to watch.”

Van der Velde’s tears now flow freely. He’s wiping, mopping, blowing his nose.

“The entity who was your wife is coming through now. She says you were a very good husband. She apologises for the pain her illness put you through. She wants you to know that you did your best. The entity agrees with Carlos that you could help others who are in the same situation. She says no-one could do it better than you. She says remember the time you caught her hiding bottles under the rug in the boot of her car?”

He stops weeping. He’s never told anyone about this. Sadie had a series of places to hide her drink. Once he borrowed her car, got a flat tyre on the highway, and opened the boot to find the space where the spare was supposed to be filled with vodka bottles.

“She says remember how angry you were?”

He does. He was enraged. After thumbing a lift back down the South Coast, and arranging for a mechanic to collect the car and fix the tyre - a hideous expense - he got all the bottles of booze that he could find, empties too, took a golf club and smashed them to pieces at the back of the men’s ablutes. Then with cuts in his face from flying glass, he found Sadie with her bottom up weeding in a flower bed, grabbed her arm and hissed at her: “THIS is what your boozing is doing to me - look at me, you are making me bleed.”

“The entity who was your wife says she is very sorry for that pain. She says you can help other families with their pain.”

“So I should be a counsellor, is that what you are saying?”

“Yes, that is what we are saying.”

“And what am I supposed to do with the caravan park?”

“Is that a question for Carlos, or for your wife?”

“For my wife.”

“She says you must give it to Bongani.”

It’s Easter and Ramsay is grateful for the cooler breezes that autumn brings. He sits in his deck-chair, one caravan down from Evie, for this is where he now lives, and admires the second-best view on the whole damn South Coast. Soon he will have to leave for Scottburgh where he has started his counsellor training with Al-Anon. To his surprise, he loves it. Having never studied anything in his life, he’s proving to be a very good student; diligent, engaged and interested. Once a week, he takes Bongani’s son Peter with him, drops the boy at his judo class and collects him from a friend’s house when he’s done.

It’s a surprise to Ramsay how much he enjoys Peter’s company. The kid’s had his life turned upside down - in just two months, he’s been wrenched from the village where he was born and where all his family and friends are, moved to the caravan park with only his

parents and his little sister for company. Instead of moping around, the kid's been helping his dad, packing shelves in the cafe and picking up litter. What guts, Ramsay thinks, as proud as if Peter were his own grandson. His own grandkids don't pick up their own clothes, let alone someone else's litter.

Bongani was astonished when Ramsay told him he was giving him a 70 percent share in the park.

"Hau," he said, and sat down on a stone.

Then he said, "Why boss? Why are you doing this?"

And Ramsay explained that he wanted to stay and to help out, but he didn't want the work. He needed someone capable, who knew the business, and who wanted to make it succeed. Of everyone he knew, Bongani was the only person who could do this. Sadie had been right. The more Ramsay thinks about it, and the more time passes, he knows that she was right.

Bongani asked for a week to think about it. Ramsay admires that. Bongani said he needed to talk it over with his tribal elders, the wise men in his village. He also had to ask his wife if she was prepared to move. Bongani explained that he and Lindiwe had both always lived in their village, that it would be a big change for them to live away from everything they knew.

But it's working well. Ramsay and Bongani (who now calls him Mr V) were a good team before, and now that the younger, more energetic man is in control, they're an even better team. Ramsay gets to do the human side, after all, he still has his human touch, while Bongani does everything else: marketing, bookings, stocks, deliveries, staff management, maintenance. Lindiwe is a maths teacher, and she's proving a whiz on the computer. The family now live at the back of the office, where Ramsay used to be. It's a win-win situation for everyone.

Well, not everyone, he admits to himself. Ellen and Lorraine were appalled. As soon as they heard, they climbed into Lorraine's large black four-wheel drive and hotfooted it down the South Coast highway.

"Daddy, how could you?" pleaded Ellen, his youngest and always the more petulant.

"Well, easily. I just said to Bongani 'I'm giving you three-quarters of my business' and he said 'OK boss'."

"Oh for God's sake, Daddy, don't be impossible. I told you he was going to be impossible," Ellen reminds her sister.

Lorraine, shorter and wider than the more ethereal Ellen, tries to reason with her impossible father.

"Daddy, surely this was something you wanted to do with family. With us, maybe, or Martin or with Sue's kids?"

“Lorraine, you know you and Ellen aren’t interested in the park. You never were. Neither are Mark and Danie. For the four of you and your kids it’s just a place to come when there’s nothing better to do - when there’re no invitations to Sani Pass and San Lameer.”

This was a dig and he knows it. His sons-in-law both love to cadge free invites - especially if there’s a golf course anywhere near. There are no golf courses near Van der Velde’s Caravan Park, just acres of beach.

“And as for my brother and sister, why would they give up their cushy lives to come and run a caravan park?”

“But what would Mummy have said?” interposed Ellen.

“Well Mummy gave up the right to make decisions when she drank herself to death,” he answered.

“For God’s sake! I can’t take this anymore.”

She flounced off, shouting over her shoulder: “I’m going for a walk on the beach. Lorraine, please deal with him.” Her mother’s wavy red hair bounced as she went.

Lorraine tried to deal with him.

“Why him, Daddy? Why Bongani?”

“I admire him. He’s got integrity. He’s come from nowhere, but he’s proved himself capable and really good at what he does.”

“But he’s ... he’s” Lorraine’s principles prevent her from actually saying the word.

Ramsay says it for her.

“Yes, Lorraine, he’s black.”

“But you, you don’t like them,” Lorraine is blustering, uncomfortable.

“Actually I like Bongani very much. He’s a great guy. There are other black people I like too. There are some white people I don’t like very much - you should have seen this woman we had in last week. Throwing her weight around, making ridiculous requests. Not at all nice, but Bongani was brilliant with her, really diplomatic.”

“So is Bongani your charity case?”

“Well maybe, but it’s the new century in the new South Africa, and I want to help someone who needs helping. Call it my black economic empowerment project. I’m empowering him.”

“But what about your grandchildren?” Lorraine’s voice is starting to grate him, as if she were a five-year-old whining for sweeties.

“Thanks to you and Danie, my grandchildren will be fine. You know that Lorraine,” this he delivers sternly, drawing a line under the conversation. “It’s not as if you lack for anything.”

The girls leave, still outraged.

Now Ramsay chuckles. His daughters are both so like their mother - opinionated, willful and believing that their own way is the only way. He enjoys outraging them, it's like prodding anemones to see them squirm. They'll come round, he knows they will. In the meanwhile, he's enjoying seeing Bongani and his young family feel their way into their new lives.

Before he leaves to fetch Peter, he looks at the two trees between his caravan's and Evie's. He'd always wanted to hang a hammock there. Now he bends down, with head at hammock level. The view that he loves so much disappears. That's it, then, no hammock necessary. He'll stick to enjoying his view from a deck-chair.