FAREWELL TO TSAVO

THE fact that we would have to leave Tsavo one day was, of course, a foregone conclusion.

But when you have devoted the best years of your life to a cause, toiling for close on 30 years to create a Park that was worthwhile; dreaming, planning, constructing, improvising, and jealously protecting; always striving to improve, with limited resources . . . When you have loved a place as deeply as we loved Tsavo, and have steered it through many crises, then the roots are deep and even the inevitable cannot help but hurt.

Following the amalgamation of the National Parks and the Game Department in February last year, the news that we were to be moved from Tsavo became a talking point long before we were officially notified, so we had plenty of prior warning to condition ourselves.

People stopped us in the street: "Was it really true?". In came letters: "Was it true?"

Even old Galogalo Kafonde, the veteran Mliangulu poacher of the fifties enquired of the driver of a passing vehicle near his village of Kisiki cha Muzungu: "Is it true that the Sirikali are moving 'Saa Nane' from Tsavo?" And when told that this indeed might be so, he shook his head incredulously and with much tongue clicking: said—"Tsavo without Saa Nane! Is there then a man that knows more about Tsavo than he?" This, coming from old Galogalo, was a compliment indeed.

Our marching orders finally arrived in a large brown envelope, incorporated in a long list with the stark heading "Transfers". We were to report to Nairobi Headquarters within three months.

For David, the brown envelope spelled the end of an era; of a way of life; and of everything closest to his heart. Once before, long ago, when the subject of transfers had been raised, he had observed: "You can cut down an old tree, but you can't transplant it".

The time had now come when he would have to decide whether in fact the old tree could be transplanted, and I knew that the decision would be a painful one. But, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he left behind him many systems that had been adopted by other Parks in other countries, and this alone spoke for itself.

I, too, would be leaving everything I cared for—the home and garden of which I was so proud, and the animals that meant so much to me.

The Orphans of Tsavo were known throughout the world through books and films and their "rehabilitation" in the wild was probably the only sustained programme of its kind and of unique interest.

Over the years, many elephant, rhino, buffalo, antelope, warthog, zebra and a host of other creatures great and small had passed through our hands, having been abandoned or injured in the Park.

Through trial and error we had succeeded in devising milk formulae to suit the different species. We had nurtured and cared for them in infancy, afforded them protection and the love and attention vital for their well being, and finally equipped them for life in the wild state by allowing them the freedom to explore the world

beyond the confines of the garden; to meet their own kind in their own time, and learn the lessons of survival as nature had intended.

Many people believe, erroneously, that a captive animal cannot hope to survive the rigours of the wild, having been denied the teaching of its kind. But not so—all wild animals, except perhaps the primates and some predators, are born with instinct; that mystical, elusive inherited knowledge that is imprinted in them and which dictates the code of life.

By instinct they know what is palatable and what is not; who is friend or foe; how to circumvent danger; and how to behave in their own society. Given the opportunity to exercise this sense, they can cope as well as any truly wild creature, as we in Tsavo have been able to demonstrate on numerous occasions.

"*We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals*," to quote Henry Best. "*Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilisation surveys the creatures through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth*".

Through the lengthy process of rehabilitation we came to learn how true all this is. A great deal of information was gathered on gestation, estrous cycles, growth rates, food preferences, diseases, social behaviour and the interaction of species under conditions as near natural as possible. Their relationship with us was one of implicit trust and this, in turn, gave confidence to the wild animals living near the Park Headquarters, providing further opportunity for observation, and affording untold pleasure not only to us but to the hundreds of tourists who visited Tsavo.

The wild guinea-fowl and francolin wandered about our garden as tame as domestic chickens; the wild dik-dik mingled with our tame antelope and lay unconcerned amongst the flowers; the birds and the squirrels looked on us as friends and would call for help in times of danger; even totally wild animals sometimes returned with our own orphans right up to the house.

A great peace prevailed there. Our garden was a tranquil oasis in a hot and dusty land; a place where man and beast lived in quiet harmony.

But this hadn't come about overnight. It had taken many years to accomplish, for every tree that spread cool shade had been planted as a seed; every flower had been specially selected and of a variety unpalatable to the many creatures that shared our garden. But, gradually over the years, the desert had bloomed in a pleasing and colourful tropical profusion, with the finishing touches to utopia provided both by the creatures it attracted and the orphaned animals who also looked upon it as their home.

Many different creatures had come and gone over the years. Most have chosen to revert to a totally wild existence once they had grown up, severing their human connections, while others had opted to retain those links and returned periodically. Each had their separate memories for us, and these at least we could take with us when we left Tsavo.

There had been failures too, of course, as testified by the little graveyard that lay beneath the dappled shade of the large Melia tree David had planted nearly 30 years ago. But perhaps it would be wrong to call them "failures", for each had enlarged our knowledge.

One small tombstone, in particular, on which was inscribed the word "Aisha", reflected a personal triumph born out of tragedy. Little Aisha, the baby elephant I had so nearly succeeded in rearing, and whose death on Christmas Day two years ago had caused such anguish in the family, had been the guinea-pig by which we were able to discover an artificial substitute for elephants' milk— something which had eluded us from the beginning. Thanks to the contribution Aisha made, another new-born elephant live today, and many others will have a second chance in life. For this reason, Aisha was probably the most significant of the orphans, but uppermost in my thoughts on the day of departure was the fate of those animals we were now leaving behind.

There was Eleanor, the gentle 18-year-old female elephant who had been a part of our family since the age of two. There was boisterous, impish Raru, a 12 year old

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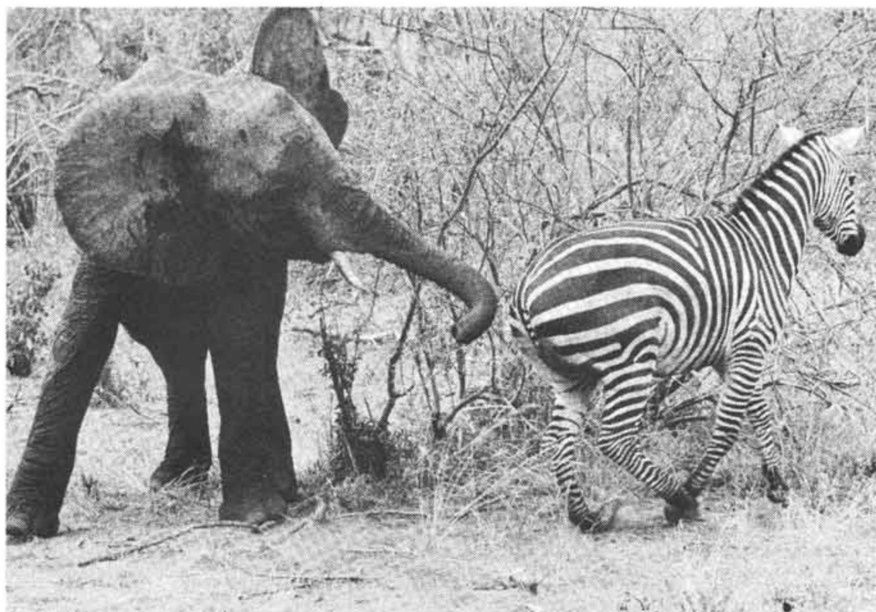

was a very bright number indeed. He worked out for himself an effective way of getting at the grapefruit. Procastinating en route, and pretending that he had decided not to come back after all, he fell far behind the column, and then, under cover of darkness, he would stealthily creep up to the orchard, barge straight through the sisal pole fence, and dash around inside helping himself to as many grapefruit as he could before being caught.

Meanwhile, having heard the fence go down, we would be out after him—but the creak of the orchard gate was the signal for retreat, and Raru would slip silently out the way he had come, and hastily put himself to bed inside his stockade, a picture of innocence.

Finally, David ambushed him in the orchard one night and gave him a jab in the bottom with the cattle prod which persuaded him finally to abandon his nightly scrumping. The cattle prod, powered by two torch cells, was used for serious breaches of dicipline, and we found it a very effective means of maintaining order. Although the electric charge was small, it produced a sensation that most animals definitely didn't like.

We often ambled up to the stockades in the evenings just to make sure that everything was in order and this was popular because of course we usually brought with us a small treat.

Eleanor liked to show off her party tricks at this time. "Shake hands, Eleanor!" and up would come one massive foreleg, ever so gently, to rest on the bars and be fondled and patted. Bukanezi, watching closely from the other stockade, obviously felt that he was missing out on something because he took to copying Eleanor and can himself now put on a polished performance.

Standing beside a three-quarter grown elephant, with implicit trust and confidence, is born of a very special understanding. The relationship is based on mutual love and sympathy, and an animal—particularly an elephant—has the instinctive ability to sense how one feels. People say that the love of an animal is like the love of God; it asks nothing, yet offers all. But standing close to Eleanor, I often reflected that this wasn't strictly true because it does ask something—deep understanding and sincere affection. Without these there can be no rapport. We hoped that those who followed us and who would assume responsibility for the animals we left behind would possess these qualities in abundance and nurture the trust in which these animals held mankind.

Eleanor and her charges were not our only concern, for there were other orphans who were probably even closer to us and would probably feel our absence even more keenly. These were the "Antelope Orphans", the leader of whom was an eight-year-old female impala known as Bunty, probably the most interesting animal that has come our way and certainly the most devoted.

Bunty's mother had also been shot by a hunter just outside the Park, and she came in when only a few days old. She was particularly stubborn about feeding and it was our daughter Jill who finally coaxed her into accepting a bottle after a two-day battle royal which entailed, amongst other things, sitting up most of the night with Bunty in the linen cupboard.

One-woman buck

When Jill returned to school, I had to take over the role of mother and have been ever since. For Bunty is essentially a "one woman buck" and although she is obviously attached to the family, and friends of ours who have succeeded in winning her confidence (no easy task), no-one can ever aspire to reach the very special pedestal on which I have been placed. She also has a remarkable memory and can instantly remember these people with whom she has made friends in the past, although they may not have been back for year or more. Nevertheless, they are permitted the liberty of scratching her head where strangers are rejected out of hand; and when David doffs his shorts and appears in long trousers, he is immediately out of favour, for she remembers that this is a prelude to a parting and that I am probably going to be taken from her. Her disapproval of David usually lasts for several days after our return as well, despite the reappearance of the reassuring shorts!

Bunty is the only orphan which has voluntarily chosen us in preference to the company of her own kind. She spends the days with us, lying in the garden and following me like Mary's little lamb, but when we are away from home, she will seek and join the wild herd. At night, too, she knows she must leave the garden for the safety of open ground, relying on superb eyesight, needle sharp hearing and fleetness of foot to survive, and then she also mixes with the wild impala. But, as the sun rises, she leaves the herd to come back, usually arriving just about the same time as the morning tea.

While she was still young, she was of course stabled at night for her own safety, but there cames a point when those basic instincts of survival assert themselves, and for an antelope to be confined in the face of danger is unnatural and terrifying. They themselves dictate the timing of the next phase of growing up, an important one in the process of rehabilitation, by flatly refusing to be enticed into a stable or enclosure at night.

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When this happens, the most vital and critical lessons begin, and so, for me, do the sleepless nights. Many are the hours that I have lain awake, trying to interpret the different sounds of an African night; worrying, wondering, powerless to influence the course of events outside in another world. Then as dawn dispels the shadows and the night noises subside, I am up, apprehensive at what I might find—or rather, not find—only to be met by faithful old Bunty, weary after the long night's vigil, plodding back up the hill.

The lessons she learned were harsh and she narrowly escaped death several times when she lingered too long at the house—once paying for her folly by facing the rush of a hungry lion as she lay on our lawn. We had to go to her assistance many times on hearing her alarm snort during the night, dashing outside with torches to chase off whatever was harassing her. More often than not, though, we realised that by interfering and distracting her attention, we could be endangering her further, and so we usually kept away and hoped for the best.

Other antelope orphans were able to benefit from her teaching, notably Jimmy, an incredibly gentle kudu bull, who was orphaned at birth when his mother made a meal for a leopard just behind the house.

Today, at five, Jimmy is a stately and extremely handsome animal, with a gun-barrel grey coat, vivid white longitudinal stripes and long spiral horns tipped with ivory.

He is also a veteran in the art of survival, having shared many of Bunty's nocturnal encounters, and can well fend for himself.

Likewise, four little yearling warthogs—Oliver, Balthazar, Cleo and Justine—who fell on hard times when their mother was killed by a lion near Aruba. They now travel far and wide, call on campers in the public camping grounds, cause consternation at the Labour Lines, irritate the Research workers by heaving over the long, neat, rows of precious skulls, and often attach themselves to the Big Orphans down by the Voi River. The pigs are a law unto themselves; intelligent, endearing and incredibly mischievous.

I was thankful that I could leave Tsavo with an easy mind, confident that all my charges were capable of coping with life on their own, but I was saddened that I would be denied something I had really been looking forward to—the joy of seeing Cleo and Justine bringing home a long tail of little Squeakers. Judging by their girth, this day may not be too far off.

At a year old, Bunty went missing for a day or two, and of course I was frantic, fearing the worst. But eventually she came home, footsore and exhausted, and with a deep horn wound in her rump. We realised then what she had been up to and, sure enough, seven months later, Bouncer, her first son was born just below our house.

When the baby was only three weeks old, she was again in need of the ram and this time managed to emerge unscathed. The result was Bonnie, her only daughter.

After that, it became a regular pattern a visit to "Father" when the latest arrival is three weeks old, crowned seven months later with a new baby. Things went wrong only once between the 6th and 7th babies who were separated by 10 months instead of the usual seven plus three weeks.

Now, with six sons and one daughter, Bunty is an old hand at the game, and each one has been born just below our house round about noon, with six hours or so of daylight in which to prepare themselves for their first challenge; that of facing the night alone in a new and harsh world.

Each time, sitting beside her recording this miracle, I have marvelled at the intricacies of nature; how the odds on survival have been apportioned very fairly. While in the process of giving birth, a mother is probably at her most vulnerable, but nature has endowed her with superb camouflage which enables her to melt into the surroundings. The amniotic fluid and membranes have to be taken care of and eaten as they appear so that there is nothing that will attract the vultures and predators. The baby itself is devoid of any scent for the first ten days of its life.

Two little front hooves herald its arrival, followed by a tiny face which waggles its ears vigorously and twitches its nose as though eager to be free of the constricting membranes. The shoulders require a special effort, but once these are clear, the baby arrives in a rush. Immediately, the mother begins the important task of licking it clean and dry, nipping through the cord, and some twenty minutes later, it staggers to its feet to take its first few wobbly steps in search of the milk bar.

It knows exactly where to look, and having fed grows stronger by the minute. By nightfall it will be frolicking around, and is equipped to face the night, relying again on that magical camouflage and the fact that it has no scent to attract the predators.

As the sun sinks, the baby will select some suitable cover, and then quietly

sink down, lying absolutely still, but always alert, to begin the long night's vigil.

The mother on the other hand will leave the vicinity completely once the baby has hidden, and will pay no further attention until dawn. Then, furtively and with utmost caution, she will return to the place where she had left it, and when she is sure that the coast is clear, will bleat softly.

There have been occasions when Bunty's offspring have shifted their position during the night, and she (and us) have become frantic searching for them, but always they have finally appeared, sometimes from quite some distance away. Obviously that call, although so soft to human ears, carries well.

At 10-days-old, the baby will begin to take an interest in greenery, nibbling little bits and pieces, and we have a feeling that this is the mechanism that triggers off its scent, because from this moment on it will remain with its mother throughout the night as well as by day. Its babyhood "lying out" has ended.

We have deliberately avoided handling any of Bunty's young, and they are therefore not as tame as their mother, but of course a lot tamer than their wild cousins. In the case of her sons, we have been able to follow their progress and observe the bond that exists between them and their mother. We lost contact with Bonnie when she was rounded up by the ram and absorbed into his harem of ewes, but the sons continue to return at regular intervals, sometimes after a prolonged absence, and have all kept in touch with their mother.

Some of them return more frequently than others. Bimbo (No. 3) is the most dutiful of the sons, but Bouncer (No. 1) has always been a regular caller. Rising six, he is now at the age when he will contest a harem of ewes, and sometimes comes home battle-scarred and looking rather sorry for himself to recuperate in the cool surroundings of his childhood.

It has been not only rewarding, but enlightening also, to have had the opportunity to observe the lives of this little impala family, and to be able to get some insight into how their minds work. Although I know all good scientists will be horrified by such anthropamorphism, I have come to the conclusion that they are not so very different from ourselves.

The elder brothers sometimes take charge of the younger ones and take them off to the bachelor herd which is where all young impala rams must serve an apprenticeship as a prelude to becoming a territorial male and as such the owner of many wives.

Sometimes the brothers bring back totally wild friends, and are puzzled by their nervousness and reluctance to relax in the garden. Bouncer had one very special friend who ended up by becoming quite tame, and earned the name Biff, which, according to our children, was short for "Bouncer's friend".

Telepathy

I am convinced now that animals possess the power of telepathy and can communicate with one another over great distances. I have a very strong feeling that Bunty, in fact, knows exactly where her children are most of the time, and can probably even call them back when she wants to.

Time and again she has stood for hours starting into the beyond, and many hours later one or more of her sons have returned. Often their appearance has happened to coincide with the arrival of another baby, and one occasion, in particular, gave us food for thought. Bimbo (No. 3) appeared on the scene soon after his little brother Bravo (No. 5) had been born, but disappeared back into the bush again to reappear an hour or so later with his elder brother Bouncer, who had been away for just over four months. Was this really just a coincidence?

Bullitt (No. 4) is the most independent of all Bunty's sons, so much so that we felt he must have fallen by the wayside, although we knew that he had accompanied his brothers to the bachelor herd. We wondered why he alone should fail to return, but then the day that Bandit was born (No. 7), all five sons apparently put in an appearance, and so Bullitt had kept in touch after all.

An interesting relationship developed between Bouncer (No. 1) and Jimmy the kudu as they grew up together, and one which has parallels in our own society.

Bouncer, who was a year older than Jimmy, liked to assert his authority by brandishing his horns rather liberally, and Jimmy, a peace-loving, friendly and extremely gentle little fellow, was often at the receiving end. But, beneath this passive and quiet nature lay a tough character who harboured a grudge and bided his time.

His horns grew and spiralled, his body filled out and his coat took on that steely look, and finally he decided the time was right to settle old scores. Advancing purposefully with lowered head and flashing eyes, he challenged Bouncer. There was a clash of horns, and Bouncer, distinctly surprised backed off a few pace to collect himself for the second round. Jimmy never flinched, and met each onslaught like a rock until one could sense Bouncer's growing amazement as he began to have second thoughts.

At this moment Jimmy rushed in, to emerge the victor with poor Bouncer having to flee ignominously round and round the garden.

Two more similar skirmishes settled the point once and for all and established —superiority. However, Jimmy's relation-

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ship with all the other brothers was one of tolerance and friendship itself, but let Bouncer appear in the garden, and those large black eyes begin to flash. Obviously, the insults of the past are neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Today, Jimmy seeks the company of the wild kudu more and more, or sometimes can be seen, sticking out like a sore thumb, among the bachelor impala—but he is very fond of Bunty and still returns occasionally to spend a day or two in the garden. At such times the wild kudu remain in the bush below the road, and Jimmy strolls onto the lawn with the slow, deliberate gait and infinite grace of his kind, as tame and as gentle as ever, but definitely exuding a firm authority.

Any hand-reared animal with horns can be dangerous, of course, but we have learned that by observing certain rules which are part of the antelope code of behaviour, trouble can be circumvented. For instance, when an animal begins to spar, as they often do amongst one another, and sometimes would like to with us, we merely turn our backs and slowly walk away, which means plainly, "Sorry, no go!" or simply "Yes, you're the Boss!" To catch hold of an animal's horns, or push its head, is a clear challenge and as such invites trouble.

Easy prey

And so, as we prepared to leave Tsavo, the only animals we were worried about leaving behind were the two rhino, Stroppie and Hoshim, whose habit of wandering outside the boundaries of the Park made them an easy prey for poachers. For sadly, poaching of both elephant and rhino was rife, and it was the tragic reality that even in Tsavo, where once the problem had been too many, now it was how many, or even if any, would be left in another decade.

Our last few weeks were a nightmare of packing cases, boxes of all sizes, mountains of junk; 30 years' accumulation of everything that had to be fitted in somewhere. Then handing over the Park, stock-taking, counting, inventories, lists, instructions, introductions—and finally the sorrowful farewells.

After that came the quieter nightmare of unpacking the mountain of luggage and setting everything out in new surroundings; the challenge of a new and different life, of a new and different assignment, but one by which David could perhaps still make a worthwhile contribution to the cause. The old tree had chosen to try and take a transplant and I was glad of this decision.

Looking back, I realise now that we are more resilient than we know; that it is possible to put the past behind and see it as the end of a beginning rather than the beginning of the end. I had dreaded this inevitable step and I was relieved that it was over.

We returned to Tsavo two months later to supervise the move of Stroppie and Hoshim to Solio Ranch near Nanyuki. One of our earlier orphaned rhino, Reudi, already resided there, and we knew that nowhere could Stroppie and Hoshim ever find a better home and that they were assured of maximum protection.

And I was, of course, eager to see Bunty again and meet her seventh baby, little Bandit.

As we drew nearer, and the old familiar features came into view, I had to remind myself constantly that this time we were not just going home. This time we would be guests in our old home. It would be a strange feeling.

Bunty was there when we arrived; dear, faithful old Bunty waiting patiently for our return just as she had done so many times in the past, and probably would in the future.

She greeted us eagerly, licking my legs and smelling me repeatedly as though to reassure herself that this wasn't just a dream. Even David's long trousers, on this occasion, were forgiven.

Then the four pigs filed in, and finally, in the evening, back up the hill came Eleanor and her little band, but with three noticeable absentees; Raru, who, we were told, had joined the wild elephants at the onset of the rains, which was not a bad thing, but Stroppie and Hoshim too, the purpose of our visit, who had taken to their heels that morning, which was a bad thing!

This turn of events dismayed us for extensive preparations had been undertaken at the other end for their reception. A fifty acre paddock surrounded by a gameproof fence had been constructed especially for them bordering the private reserve in which they would finally be released, so that they could meet the local residents before actually having to live with them. The lorries and travelling crates were on the way—and so, come what may, the truants would have to be rounded up!

At dawn all available hands took part in the hunt, aided by the Park's Supercub aircraft, and we were greatly relieved when, a few hours later, news of success was received. They had been spotted just below the Safari Lodge and were in the process of being herded back home.

On arrival, they were showered with sugar-cane, sweets, bananas and every other conceivable thing that might help to tempt a rhino to go into a box. The enticements succeeded, despite a certain scepticism at first, but by dawn the following morning they were in the boxes. Down went the doors, first on Stroppie and then, at last, on Hoshim, who was beginning to have very definite doubts about the whole thing, having seen Stroppie vanish hearing her pleading cries from inside.

Eleanor and Bukanezi had seen what had taken place, and realised, I think, that Stroppie and Hoshim were being taken from them, for they were trying to climb the bars of their stockade in a frantic attempt to get out.

When the lorries pulled away we opened the doors and an avalanche of elephant came hurtling out, trumpeting loudly and sending the grass cutters, who had been idly surveying the scene, flying in all directions.

Then the elephants set about the garden fence and vented their disapproval by felling all the pawpaw trees inside, all the time dashing to and fro and bellowing furiously.

There was no doubt about it; Eleanor was very, very upset, and I wished I could reassure her and tell her that her two friends would be in good hands.

So the chapter closed on our lives, and on the lives of the orphans as well. But strong invisible ties remain and we will be returning from time to time to gaze again on those wide open spaces washed with sun; to feel once more the thrill of a truly wild place; find peace in the twisted beauty of an old Commiphora tree and savour the long remembered fragrance of that terracotta earth; to listen again to the symphony of sounds that epitomise that very special place—the call of the vulturine guineafowl, the hum of a tsetse, the nocturnal note of the tiny Scops owl, and the low, loved rumble of an elephant at peace.

But that aching especially to fulfill a yearning for the company of our friends—these very, very special friends that are the Orphans of Tsavo.

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