

Rural Africa

Setting description

Within the thriving metropolis of Johannesburg, the streets throb with movement, domineering buildings ascend as proud symbols of prosperity, restaurants tempt customers with worldwide cuisine and activity illuminates the night sky. Beyond, in rural Africa, people live a simpler life. An existence where nothing is certain... where survival walks a perilously thin tightrope.

Leaving the village, the roads peter into dusty tracks. The environment gradually changes until the wilderness triumphs and the landscape becomes an ocean of furnace-baked soil. Distorting the view, shimmering heat hazes dance above the orange crust which – barren and thirsty – releases a peppery, earthy aroma.

Lacking the energy to soar, acacias cast pockets of welcome shade over the parched ground where weary workers enjoy respite from the day's cruel temperature. Lonely goats roam between tangles of thorny shrubs, desperately seeking essential nutrients. Their pitifully feeble bleats carry in the humid air like a mournful plea for mercy. Everywhere, there are the skeletal remains of victims that lost their battle with the elements. Roofless shacks, ashen, bare-branched trees and ox skulls crowned with decaying horns all litter the ground.

Across the hillside, a small township resides. Unlike the city, land is plentiful here, so the houses rest in open plots, unmarked by boundary walls or fences. The low, whitewashed walls support thin roofs which are either tiled with terracotta slates or made from crude sheets of corrugated metal scarred with islands of rust. The small windows bar the heat but are left open to welcome any hint of a cooling breeze. An extended family occupy some homes, whilst others are home to a solitary village elder. Doors remain unlocked. Neighbours visit unannounced. Barefoot children run freely.

At the heart of the settlement, a freshwater pump beckons a long queue of women and children who chat amicably while they await their turn. Each person carries a jerry can, pot or pail to collect their quota. Not a drop is wasted. The precious gift is sacred.

People here have retained the ancient skills, customs and beliefs of their forefathers, yet the community is steadily developing to embrace modern influences. Overhead, endless lengths of wire attached to monstrous pylons – quite out of place in this rustic setting – slither towards the horizon. Their charged cables offer erratic bursts of electric power to those who can afford the luxury. Radio songs mingle with the honest clatter of day-to-day chores and satellite dishes adorn a smattering of roofs. Will the native traditions endure the changing times?

When day surrenders to night, darkness falls like a heavy, velvet drape. The distant mountains form an inky silhouette... the atmosphere opens its countless jewelled eyes... the air cools. Below the vast abyss, the settlement appears small... insignificant... vulnerable. The eerie cries of Africa's nocturnal wildlife are the only sounds that break the silence. All too soon, the sunrise erupts like a fuming volcano poised to shower its heat. Another arduous day begins.

Most residents work the land for a living. They sow, weed, water and harvest crops to feed their families. Scraping a meagre profit, farmers sell their produce in tattered roadside stalls or load it upon open-sided trucks to try their luck in township markets.

Life in rural Africa is so unfamiliar to city dwellers that it could be a foreign land. It is impossible for them to recognise the hardship felt by countryfolk... to fear drought... to dread famine. Will the rain arrive this year?