

HOT FLASHES *and hyenas*

Itchy, hairy, sweaty, angry and wondering what it's all about? **Lorraine Kearney** goes in search of purpose



Last year, I had a purpose. I was a mother; my last born was in their final year of school. Getting them through that hell run without blood on the floor was the aim. And it took a lot.

'Bye,' they say, racing out the door on their way to wherever it is they go. My child has taken up couch surfing, living their best life. Sometimes I don't see them for days. It is good in parts. Not so good when I discover my things have gone couch surfing, too.

This child has zero boundaries when it comes to me. They're not separate from me and hence everything of mine is theirs, too. (It does not work the other way around, in case you're wondering if I am in need of a microskirt and Doc Martens.)

My first born also finished last year, this time their undergrad. And they're going off into the world. The zen-ist person who ever walked the Earth. They'll be fine.

Grown and flown. This is what we want, apparently. What do we get in return?

Hot flashes, itchy skin, bingo wings, wobbly bellies, thunder thighs, hair creeping from our heads to our chins like stealthy illegal migrants in the night. Utter loss of any interest in getting it on with anyone, possibly ever again.

And rage. Surging, unstoppable fury so close to the surface it's almost the surface itself. And when we're not a whirling dervish of seething anger and sweat, despair. They're like two cats fighting in a sack. I'd feel sorry for

my husband if I had any spare energy not spent trying to control this directionless freak I have become.

The despair: I have wed, bred and spread. I've ticked all the milestones. And what is left? Who am I now? Who am I really, even? And what am I going to do with the rest of my allotted time? Ending it all is too messy, my mother assures me. She should know.

I have a dim recollection of a slender, fit and bendy person, fleet of foot and energetic of vision. Probably a photo I saw in a magazine once.

Elephants. Elephants were the answer. They know a lot, and they never forget (or so we're told). And so off I set to learn from the old matriarch elephants. Botswana has the most elephants of all, so I booked my passage to Chobe

National Park. The flight to Livingstone in Zambia was with Proflight, pocket-friendly and available, which suited me perfectly.

Livingstone, because if you're in that part of the world, you have to drop in at the Victoria Falls. It's a law, or it should be. I am here to tell you that when the falls are in their seasonal flood, the Zambian side is hands down the best side.

But we're here for the elephants and what the wise old matriarchs can teach us. They settle into their roles with grace and dignity and a deep understanding of why they are here and what it's all about.

They lead the herd, passing on all they have learned to the next generation, protecting the younger elephants, especially the babies. They are fearsome in their responsibilities and gentle in their tasks.

They carry generations of knowledge in their heads. Yes, you had a huge, constant spreadsheet in your head for years, filled with ceaselessly moving parts of school needs and extra-murals and doctors' appointments and such. A spreadsheet that is now alarmingly empty, little cells not knowing what to do with their time.

I'll wager an elephant matriarch's spreadsheet is bigger, with more moving parts, and she always knows what to do with her time.

The trip from the frontier town of Kasane to the lodge is a meandering one through the Chobe National Park. The first sight my guide, David, takes me too is elephants. But not of the live variety. They're bones. Huge femurs and ribs, a massive skull and whatever those many other ones are. All greying in the burning sun.

The smell is indescribable. The smell of death and carrion. The hide has been dragged a few metres away by hyenas to soften enough in the rains to eat. This elephant died of natural causes just two weeks ago and so efficient is nature that all that is left are bones and skin and stench. Even those will disappear over time.

'Nevermind,' David says cheerfully, 'there're lots of live ones.' Of course, he's right. There are about 130 000 ellies in Botswana. He is a bit confused,

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though he keeps it to himself, why this mad woman wants to take photos of the bones, and so he takes me to several elephant carcasses.

If you were ever wondering where the mythical elephant graveyard was, I can show you.

I'm sad. Is this what it's all about? David has lived in the bush all his life, and ever the pragmatist, he explains how it works: the elephants keep the foliage in check by eating it; they die and their bodies feed lions, hyenas, vultures and all manner of little critter; their bones disintegrate and the minerals dissolve into the earth to enrich the soil; new, healthy foliage grows out of it for other elephants to eat.

Reduce. Reuse. Renew. Recycle.

It does seem a bit pointless though. I don't think elephants are my spirit animal anymore.

My hopes turn to rage turn to truculence turn to despair. Not even the giraffe at the waterhole under the full moon in front of me while I eat my solitary (delicious) dinner makes me happy. Not even when it bends down to drink. It's ungainly, but more graceful than me.

These days, if I drop something on the floor – my glasses, say – I decide I don't really need them and walk away. Easier.

I walk off; I stalk off. A puddle of angry, pointless, depressed human. And oh god, a hot flash. Now, in the bush, when it is 35 degrees at 9 pm and there is no air-con. I wonder frantically if I am a beacon to snakes, heat-seeking missiles.

The table is the highest place. But snakes can slither up trees so surely table legs will not be a problem? I wobble, the table wobbles. We both come crashing down. I am sore but at least I am cool again.

Outside my tent, a hyena whoops – a lot. Scary, yes. But so am I. And I am

good at googling in a tent in the bush in a sweat in the middle of the night.

Hyenas are wild animals with specific dietary and behavioural needs. They keep the balance between food resources and the herds that use them. They're efficient predators and are not afraid of conflict. They are unsuitable as pets.

I have found my spirit animal.

HOW TO TELL IF YOUR NEXT LIFE STAGE IS MENOPAUSE*

- You wake up at 2 am on Monday morning
- You're in a puddle of sweat and throw off the duvet. But it doesn't help at all
- You tear off your PJs, but the thought of your husband coming near you makes you want to stab him with a fork (husbands and lovers, take this as a friendly warning; a perimenopausal woman is not to be trifled with)
- In the morning, your chin is bumpy and you have to have a quick pluck that turns into a longer plucking (again, husbands and lovers, this is a friendly warning; do not suggest she borrow your razor)
- Your arms suddenly don't fit your sleeves; yesterday they did
- You belt is suddenly on its last notch; the next step – you fantasise about them at this point – is elasticated waists
- You can't reach your feet to fasten your sandals (husbands and lovers, this is your time to be gallant – and learn to paint toenails)
- Your emotions are another country, several other countries, constantly at war, actually. It is time to go in search of your spirit animal.

*This is not medical or scientific fact. I'm not a doctor, just a woman 'living the dream, baby'.

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