

Bob Kunzinger

Nowhere to Be Found

I stood ankle deep in the Congo River as water ran up my calves and I thought about Joe. Six thousand miles earlier in a small college town he had told me about the village of Kolwezi not far from here, just a few kilometers from where he once lived. For years I pictured this spot, studied the terrain, the food, the language, and the wildlife. Now, I felt water running around my legs, coarse riverbed under my sandals, and I looked west before I waded in further with more confidence, thinking about our last conversation.

We stood in a stairwell on campus. It was our last gray morning, and we waited for the taxi to take Joe to the bus to get him to the airport to start his great adventure. We sat in silence a long time. Finally, I asked him something that had curiously never crossed either of our minds to that point. “Did you ever wonder why no one has ever canoed the Congo alone?”

Joe smiled. “Because you’d have to be out of your mind to do something like this,” he replied, completely serious. “Unless you have the right ingredients, and I do,” he added in a reassuring tone. He fingered an ivory tooth on a chain around his neck. He only did this when he was anxious. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe I’m trying to ‘find’ myself.” The taxi arrived and he left.

I never saw Joe again.

The Congo tugged at my feet. Maybe he didn’t get very far. This is the edge of one of the most remote areas on the planet, and he left in the early ’80s—one of the most dangerous times in its history. On maps this is called the Lualaba River, but villagers here call it the Congo. I wasn’t ready for that.

The trees bent toward the river, and men fished and spread nets. Did they watch Joe paddle by? Did they wave? Maybe he traveled for weeks before some wide tributary teased him off course. Perhaps after just a few days he became too weak to continue. It might not have mattered to him

whether he was sick or in danger. It wouldn't have mattered to me; the spirit of place takes over. It would be easy to suppress knowledge of diseases, stagnant water, depleted food supply, and the probable need to survive solely on what the river had to offer. A year's worth of preparation; a few years of experience on the river, a plan to canoe the entire Congo alone, would not have been abandoned because of a mild illness or a threat of wildlife; that much I am sure of.

The water ran up my thighs as a long canoe moved behind me. I thought I might turn and find him there or standing on the shore, laughing, shocked, wondering what the hell I was doing in Zaire not far from the headwaters of the Congo. "This is *my* trip," I could hear him saying before giving a laugh. "Go home!" Two boys stared at me from the canoe filled with nets. They would have been toddlers when Joe pushed in near here.

On the other shore two men cut open a cow, its carcass carved into meat chunks piled on the dirt. One man sanded the leathery skin while the other peeled meat off the bone. The cow's head leaned against a tree, and they had stacked bones next to the man carving the cuts of beef. Flies were everywhere.

This journey started in another hemisphere with an innocent, passing comment. "I have an idea," he had said. We finished eating wings and ordered another pizza. It was spring, and all about were signs of new life. The trees outside showed buds on the end of bare branches, and the moon broke through a cloudy sky.

Sauce splattered Joe's place mat so he grabbed mine and flipped it over. He sat upright, his eyes darted to me and then to the mat as he drew slowly using blue cheese dressing. At first it looked like the Amazon where he had also traveled. But no, it looked somewhat like New York or Virginia. No. He carefully covered the entire sheet then drew a line of ranch dressing to resemble a river running from the southeast in a bell curve back down to the southwest.

Zaire; the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"I have an idea," he said, and by the time the restaurant closed the mat sat stained with sauce as symbols of borders and rivers. The sketch of Zaire and the Congo stretched from Lumbumbashi across the equator twice to Banana Beach on the Atlantic. "I need your help," he said, looking at me. "No one in history has ever done this." He told me of Henry Stanley, of Joseph Conrad, how they had droves of villagers, but no one ever did this alone.

Then, more seriously, he said, "Bob, we need to figure this out."

My life came to attention as if I just began to breathe on my own. My life was never so clarified as when I mapped this trip with Joe. I served my internship for adventure with a modern David Livingstone.

Everything changed. Joe planned to leave the following fall, so we had work to do. The college where I studied and from where he graduated some years earlier rests on the banks of the Allegheny River in western New York—and that river became our Congo; it became our classroom and

dining hall. We caught fish and dried them in the sun. We read Joseph Conrad and Beryl Markham and Henry Stanley. We questioned what made these people travel to Africa, and then we searched until we found out. Conrad chased a fortune, Stanley chased Livingstone, and Markham chased the horizon. It was a whole new way of existence. We digested these authors like river water on a hot day. We listened to the music, studied the art, and absorbed the very humanity of the Congo. The hues and texture of the small college town eroded to the sweeping flow of African culture.

We learned the legends and tales, particularly the important roles played by animals in African folklore. The antelope and gazelle represent intelligence, the pig is considered foolish, the lion stands for strength, and the crocodile is usually a villain.

“Gotta respect the crocs!” Joe would call when we swam in the river.

We saturated our reading list with African literature. We concentrated on pretwentieth-century material, mostly by or about explorers, but recent writings intrigued us as well. After the Second World War, a large body of literature developed written in French and local Bantu languages. Two of the regions best-known writers are Antoine Roger Bolamba, who was not only an important poet but also the author of sociological and folklore studies, and V.Y. Mudimbe, who has published poetry, criticism, and several novels, beginning in 1973 with *Between the Tides*. We read it, Joe in French, me in English. We talked about translation, laughed over misinterpretation of words, and realized the dangers in trying to communicate with someone in a village.

This led us to study the etymology of languages and the similarities of Lingala, Lomongo, Kikongo, Kiswahili, and other Bantu derivatives. More importantly, we discussed when to speak and when not to speak a particular language. Those who speak Congolese fight with those who speak Lomongo. Villagers speak Kiswahili in the east. Lingala is used more now than it was then, but then it was still used more than Kikongo. African borders reflect colonial history rather than linguistic boundaries, so many languages are spoken in one area. Some Congo languages use tones. Some villagers rely upon click language, using fifteen click consonants borrowed from South African languages. Stanley had translators. Joe had to practice.

I didn't yet realize it was me who would play the part of Stanley, searching the most remote region of the planet for unobtainable answers. Despite endless months of training and planning, things hadn't gone so well for Joe. In his last letter he described his days before he disappeared. He pushed his boat into the river just to the west of Kolwezi. Luaba village rests on the Lualaba River, just upstream from the main part of the Congo. Joe was tired and sick, fighting a case of worms. He patched his boat together with inner tubes from a bicycle. He should have waited until he was feeling better, but practically speaking, the coming rains demanded he cross the equator as soon as possible. Flooded rivers are difficult to navigate, and the village migration inland would cut off his food supply. By the time he

reached Kolwezi, many small villages had already disappeared, displaced by either war or famine. He had counted on those stops just north of Lumbumbashi to gather vegetables and meat. Those conditions exacerbated his sickness from stagnant river water and lack of food. And after going over a small waterfall, which flooded his supplies, he relied upon fish dried in the sun.

I stood in the Congo not concerned about crocs or dysentery or storms. I was completely at peace surrounded by the most accommodating villagers I'd met from West Africa to southeastern Zaire. I understood why Joe had such confidence. The villagers' command of the river can be mistaken for ease of access to the area by anyone. That simply isn't true.

We were fooled into complacency by our extensive research. We knew the topography, the horticulture, the language, and the cultures. The history and social science departments at the college taught us of President Mobutu and his dictatorship as well as the United States support of Zaire during the troubles with Angola. We learned that Mobutu tried to live up to his name, Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa za Banga, which means "The all-powerful warrior who, because of his inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake." We studied the Carter administration's objections to Mobutu's human rights records. With the trip coming just after Reagan took office, Zaire's interest in the United States would be strong again, and we knew every little bit helped. We studied with noted interest the Shaba invasions from Angola into Zaire's Shaba Province two years earlier. For one, the two rebel invasions were very recent, and two, the tricky parts of Joe's journey came through the eastern portion of the Shaba Province. We digested mathematical skills for navigation. We sat for endless hours in absolute silence. We talked.

We measured speed and agility. The professors in natural sciences told us about the tenderizing a croc does to an oversized, tough meal, stuffing it under rocks till it loosens up enough to chew. We learned that hippos could be the most dangerous animals along the river. We marked on maps the trouble areas. Just past Kolwezi in the Shaba Province we expected trouble with navigation. The river breaks and rejoins in a multitude of arteries where being lost meant never being found. We knew that once Joe made it past Kabalo and Kisangani, we could practically celebrate. I would fly to Kinshasa and head to Banana Beach. *National Geographic* would not commit financially but agreed to see what happened. We made copies of the maps for small waterproof pouches, and I saved the originals in case of emergency. Joe secured a visa and bought the plane ticket. This was real. My God, this was happening. Nearly a year had passed, yet I did more, learned more, laughed and lived more than ever in my life. We were so ready.

On the way to Kolwezi, on the back of trucks while riding across unpaved and dangerous roads, I read piles of printouts from the Centers for Disease Control, the State Department, the CIA, the Peace Corps, the Red Cross,

Save the Children, the New York Times, the Kinshasa papers. I read stories about Rwandans heading southwest, toward the Shaba area, where, as far as I know, Joe was last seen. One *Buffalo Evening News* story exposed the linguistic nightmare of navigating across Zaire with local guides, never mind as Joe attempted it—alone on the river. Language in the Congo is a semantic time bomb detonated by the wrong phrase spoken to the wrong person. Joe’s death can be attributed to a variety of reasons; in fact, his still being alive is the least likely and most laughable scenario. A plethora of outcomes remains possible, yet all narratives bend toward death.

It is simply too easy to die in the Congo. Soldiers in the Shaba Province or Rwandan rebels to the east? Dysentery or stagnant water? Loneliness? Any guess is at best speculation, and even then I must rely upon sweeping generalizations and unsupported judgments. “The rebels will kill you” is true, and evidence of the slaughter in later years, long after Joe had disappeared, justifies that theory. But no evidence exists to confirm Joe’s death. Unfortunately, the primary attribute of “missing” is an absence of evidence.

Now the truth remains buried beneath a variety of possibilities. I don’t know how he died, if he died. He could be lost in the jungles; living in a village; Ebola; malaria; dysentery; the fabled crocodile men of the Congo.

The variables are exhausting. A croc can kill, but a hippopotamus won’t even chew. Large, snapping bites, and the limbs sink to the river bottom for other animals to devour. Villagers kill Joe because he is a mercenary. Rebels kill him because he is not. The sun bakes. The night chills. The river bends and turns then twists into a thousand branches lit by nothing but moonlight, if the moon is out. Some tributaries travel thousands of miles and turn back on themselves, a labyrinth circling toward nothingness. He could be anywhere, which is to say, essentially, he is nowhere to be found. The only truth I knew for sure was I had to find out what happened, no matter how far into the heart of darkness I needed to travel.

I stood waist deep in the Congo a stone’s throw from Kolwezi and wondered how he could be considered dead if there is no body. “Probably dead” is not absolute in the minds of those who know a missing person. The widest variety of possibilities exists in the space between missing and dead. Like endlessly dividing a number in half, where one will never reach zero despite the infinitely minuscule fractions, no matter how long someone is missing and no matter how many searches occur of forests and waterways in the south-central Congo River area, without a body, the search will never reach “dead.” There may be memorials in small western New York towns and services, masses, remembrances, but no one lives in peace if a friend remains missing.

I let my hands glide on the surface of this gentle and ruthless Congo River and tried to negotiate “missing.” We didn’t plan for this; no one does. At the very least, death is concrete. It keeps our attention because of what

we call an “ending.” We despise death for its finality, but we don’t avoid it for the sheer concrete truthfulness it carries. There is weight in death, and clarity. Closure. In a paradoxical way, it is the ultimate security. It is too real to dismiss.

But when missing enters the mix, the direction of the narrative remains muddled among the infinite number of inconclusive outcomes. The tragedy of missing is the lack of proof of either life or death. Ask the family of a missing person if the loved one is dead or not. Missing is an unfinished prayer. There is no “Amen.” In a “missing” story, the standard crisis, climax, falling action, and resolution is not present. The dynamics of character are allusive, and no epiphany exposes the flaws of the antagonist. Here, the hero is in a suspended state, and the antagonist is the void between the climax and the conclusion. It is simply incomplete, and nothing short of a corpse can change that. Missing means spending the rest of one’s life wondering where, when, if he’ll suddenly show up.

I stood waist deep in the headwaters of the Congo River contemplating continuing west, toward the most remote swath of jungle on the planet. My thoughts ricocheted between a world of innocence in pubs and libraries in western New York where these villages and river lines leaped off the page and begged me to explore their mysteries and the red clay and brown dust on the languid green hills of Zaire. My world split between one of certainty and confidence and the other of ambiguity and senselessness where the lack of confirmation concerning Joe’s whereabouts forced me to search some remote region of Zaire. My mind slid beyond reason.

I stood half in the Congo looking west across rocks and probably bones, contemplating a journey I was neither prepared for nor desired. A canoe passed behind me, and on the shore sat my supplies—a backpack filled with practically nothing at all. My guide and translator patiently stood on shore. It took me a long time to get here, I thought.

Then, much like Welshman Henry Stanley must have realized after Livingstone’s death, the Congo turned out to be as much my journey as Joe’s, only for me there would be no “Dr. Livingstone, I presume.”

No. I simply turned and waded to shore and picked up my backpack. It was time to move on.