Foepie and I, and his brother, were fishing at Lake Kariba because the fish were biting.

That seems like an overly simple statement, but there is more to it than meets the eye, things like tigerfish, giant vundu, pink bicycles, uncut emeralds, and maybe even a moral or two.

To help you understand more fully how this particular fishing trip came about, there is a little thing you should know about Foepie’s brother, who was originally baptized Ronald but is now known by another name, though not everyone calls him by his new name. Not to his face, anyway.

At some time in the past, Ronald, as he was then known, risked his and his brother Foepie’s combined savings in a speculative planting of green beans. This one hectare of green beans was going to reverse the family fortune and enable the two brothers to live the rest of their lives in the style they desperately wished to become accustomed to, like spending more time with fishing rods and rifles than battling with ploughs and cattle dip and such things. Alas, this speculative venture was plagued right from the start. First by bean-eating insects, then rust, then hungry duikers and finally, a poor market. It was only natural, in the Transvaal Lowveld, that Ronald was renamed Jan Boontjies. But it was how his new name came about, rather than the name itself, that has a bearing on this story.

It came to pass that Foepie and brother Jan met up with a stranger. This at a time...
when their memories of the beans were no longer as green as they’d once been, but the dent in the savings account could still be felt, in the same way a blister can still make you limp a bit long after the stone that caused it has been removed from your veldskoen. This stranger looked a bit shady to me. His most distinguishing feature was a big, not very clean bandage wrapped around one leg, which I was later told, was the result of a crocodile bite he had received while swimming across the Zambezi River.

For a month prior to the then still unplanned fishing expedition, whenever I stopped by for a visit with Foepie, I would find him and brother Jan and the stranger in a huddle, deep in conversation. The moment I arrived the conversation would stop. Then, with all the subtlety of a gut-shot buffalo in full charge, Foepie would change the subject, at times in strange ways, like wondering out loud whether the fish were biting and then nudging his two companions, who seemed to find difficulty in suppressing their laughter at what they obviously considered to be a clever bit of dialogue.

I became convinced that the stranger had told them about a new fishing spot and that they were planning a trip without inviting me along. This later proved to be correct, but not for the reasons I’d suspected.

At first I tried hard to ignore the fact that Foepie was going to exclude me from a fishing trip, but then my need to go along became too strong to control. I begged, wheedled and pleaded with him to let me in on the secret. For a long time he refused to tell me what was going on, but in the end he relented. He had no option, I told on him. I spoke to his wife, Patience.

“Bielie, that was a very low thing you did,” Foepie said later, sounding very hurt. “Telling Mrs. Patience that I am being ugly to you wasn’t fair. There are certain rules in this game (I wondered what game he meant) that you should learn to keep to. Since I now have no choice, you may as well know the whole story. It has always puzzled me why a married woman will invariably side with another man against her husband. If you ever find out about this thing, Bielie, seeing you are so good at uncovering secrets, then maybe you will explain it to me one day.”
We were in his shed, melting down old, lead drainpipes into four-ounce pyramid sinkers. Foepie stalked across to the door and closed and bolted it. He then sneaked across to the window and took a long look outside, before he pulled the old fertilizer bag he uses as a curtain across it. Then he went to the bin where he stores the dog food, stuck his hand down into the pellets, rummaged around and produced a familiar square bottle. He poured a good dollop of the bottle’s contents into a tin mug and moved closer to where I was sweating over the melting pot.

“Now, Bielie, listen carefully, because I don’t want to have to repeat this. That nice stranger Jan and I have been talking to is of noble birth and comes from a very rich family. Because he is very modest, however, he does not want this to become common knowledge. Until a few months ago he lived up north. He lost most of his fortune during the recent coup and only just managed to escape with his life by swimming across the Zambezi. But before leaving in a hurry he managed to hide an old aspirin bottle, the family-sized one, full of emeralds in the rafters of a friend’s house. He was on his way to his sister, who lives in Benoni, to borrow some money when he happened to meet Jan. Because he has taken such a liking to us and has found us to be honest folk (not just honest, but also smart enough to recognise a good investment when we saw one, was what he said) he proposed a deal. If we would finance his trip, plus a bit extra for certain immediate expenses he had, he would go back up north, in disguise, fetch the emeralds, and bring them back across the border, only this time he wouldn’t be swimming across the river. He would then share these valuable stones equally amongst us. But, Bielie, bringing uncut emeralds out of that country is not quite legal, so we have to be careful.”

Foepie took a quick gulp from the mug and then stalked across to the window again and took a hard look around. I wasn’t sure what he expected to find, the strongmen from the military junta now in control of the country he intended stealing emeralds from, or Patience trying to catch him with the forbidden bottle in the shed. I suspected he was more concerned about the latter.
“We have devised a clever plan, Bielie,” Foepie said, after he had moved back closer to me. “I have drawn five thousand rand from my Post Office savings account and the stranger has now gone back to fetch the emeralds. Once he has them, he is going to buy a bicycle, a Western Flyer, with a three-speed and thick tyres, like the rich children had when they used to ride past Jan and I walking to the farm school. He is going to hide the emeralds inside the tyre tubes. He is then going to paint the bicycle pink. This will enable us to recognise him when he comes across the border, because remember he will be in disguise. And also, not even a customs official as smart as that one who found our biltong hidden in the sleeping bags and confiscated it when we came out of Namibia last year would think that a man riding a pink bicycle would have anything to hide. Even in our own country today, people that would ride such a bicycle don’t worry to hide anything.

He is going to cross the border riding this bicycle,” Foepie went on. “Jan and I will be waiting for him on the other side, ready to collect our share of the emeralds. To let us know when we must be there he is going to telephone us two days before with the code words the fish are biting.”

Foepie stood back with a Machiavellian grin on his face, as though the bright gems already glittered in the work-worn palm of his hand. But all I could see was another bean field.

“No now that you know, Bielie, there is no reason you can’t come along and do some fishing, while Jan and I take care of the real business. This will be a good thing, in fact. We will set up a little camp. This will provide us with a good reason for being there should anyone become curious. Careful with that ladle, Bielie. You nearly spilt hot lead on my boot there.”

The rest of the afternoon passed with me doing all the sinker making while Foepie told me about all the things he was going to do when he was rich. It seemed I would have to make a lot more sinkers.

Two weeks passed, and then Foepie phoned and whispered, “The fish are biting.”
Two days later found me in a boat on Kariba, slowly trolling a big silver-bladed spinner sweetened with a strip of fillet on the single hook. Foepie and Ronald (I thought it would be bad luck to think of him as Jan Boontjies just then) were at the border post at the dam wall, trying to look inconspicuous, just two more tourists enjoying the hot sun and magnificent views.

Round about noon I hooked my twelfth good tigerfish, and the largest so far that day. I’d stopped trolling and had been casting a single hook baited with a bunch of kapenta, a bait so good that anglers sometimes eat it themselves. The tiger set off hard and fast, nearly taking the light spinning rig out of my hands and causing me to slip on the smooth nose of the small runabout we had hired. I fell over backwards into the boat, but the fish stayed on.

Unhooking the beaten tiger alongside the boat I wondered again at the strangeness of a fish with such a wicked set of teeth at one end and the rubbery adipose fin of a trout near the other. I took a moment to also wonder how my two companions were doing at the border post, waiting for the pink bicycle. It is possible to look inconspicuous for only so long, especially when there are things on your mind a lot more important than just catching a tan while admiring the view.

After lunch and a catnap I went game viewing in the boat. I’d caught enough tigers for a while.

Herds of waterbuck and buffalo made their way along the winding game paths that meandered down the rugged escarpment and onto the green floodplain along the edge of the lake; solitary elephant bulls ambled disdainfully past the lesser animals to feed and drink at their leisure; hippos snorted their annoyance if the boat came too close to them; and occasional, ever-loathsome crocodiles muddied the green water as they slid from view.

I spent the late part of the afternoon catching small tigers on flies in the shallows.
It seemed these fish hadn’t seen many flies, and this coupled with their natural savageness had them hitting hard and fast, with more of them staying attached to the small, sharp hooks than is usually the case with bigger lures.

I got back to camp just after sunset, in a mood befitting an angler who has just had a day of great fishing. The mood of my two companions was not as jubilant. The look on their faces was not that of two prospective millionaires. Just the opposite, in fact. The only response I could get to my questioning was that they had seen some bicycles. Some of them had even been Western Flyers, but none of them was pink. I encouraged them not to give up hope, adding that the stranger had obviously been delayed by some minor problem. Then I gave them a blow-by-blow report on the fishing, which, if anything, made them even more mournful.

The next day I was back in the boat, this time with some lighter line, small long-shanked hooks, and a tin of lively red worms. Foepie and Jan were back at the wall, parked in a different place, watching for a pink bicycle.

I tied the boat to a dead tree at the edge of the lake where red, sandstone cliffs fell away into deep water. On his perch nearby, a magnificent black and white fish eagle glared at me and then puffed out his chest and screamed to the world at large that this was his fishing spot. Bright, rainbow-coloured bee-eaters darted in and out of their nest holes dug deep into the vertical, ochre bank, and further on a pair of long-legged jacanas searched among the flat lily pads for whatever it is jacanas always seem to be searching.

I imagined Foepie and Jan down at the wall, furtively scrutinizing bicycles as they sipped warm rum and coke. I was sipping ice-cold beer and looking for Cornish jack, bottlenose and chessa. Right then not even the prospect of instant riches would have got me to consider swopping places with the emerald smugglers.
Sometime earlier Foepie had announced that, weight for weight, emeralds were virtually as valuable as diamonds. On the same basis of comparison, I reckon a chessa, with his swallow tail and small, streamlined head, puts up as good a fight as a tigerfish, maybe even better. He hits suddenly and sharply, and makes the line sing as it slices the surface of the still, deep water he favours.

Chessa are not always easy to find, but this time I hit the jackpot on my first try. The fishing was hectic, and when the chessa stopped biting the bottlenose took over. It was one of those days when you half wish the fish would stop hitting so you can have a bit of a rest and eat your lunch. I rounded off the afternoon with the fly rod, battling young tigers until my wrist was sore and I had a bruise on my belly from the rod butt.

That night the atmosphere around the campfire was, at best, funereal. I thought it wise not to ask too many questions about the day’s bicycle spotting and made only casual mention of the fishing, as though it hadn’t been up to much.

The following morning I put some heavy tackle aboard and informed my two companions that I was going to look for something different, one of the giant vundu that live in that great lake. I suggested that maybe they, too, should have been looking for something different. Instead of a pink Western Flyer, with a heavy frame and a three-speed and fat tyres, maybe what they should have been looking for instead was, say, a green, lightweight aluminium-framed racing bike with a ten-speed and thin, very fast tyres. Then I quickly started the outboard and headed out into the lake.
Again, for the third day in a row, the fish were co-operative. I caught three vundu, as well as losing a few, and all of them were big, one huge. I was happy to let them all go. I didn’t fancy being alone in a cramped boat with a big, black, whiskered monster with a vacuum cleaner mouth and jaws like a vice.

The despair in the eyes of Foepie and Jan as I unloaded the boat that evening with arms sore from battling big fish was indeed a sad thing to see. Obviously the pink bicycle had not been seen, and it was clear to all of us then that it never would be.

The next, and final, day found all three of us in the boat. Foepie and Jan agreed that they may as well get at least some return on their investment. They also agreed on a few other things (mainly strangers from the north and pink bicycles) and they came up with some interesting, though I think physically impossible suggestions as to how they would handle such objects if they ever came across them in the future.

The rising sun threw a shimmering red road across the broad lake as we sat quietly watching the three porcupine quill floats resting flat on its mirror-calm surface, waiting for the telltale quiver signalling the interest of a plate sized Kariba bream in one of our worms. The keepnet already held a couple of good ones; we’d at least be taking some fillets home with us, but no emeralds.

With a little grunt of pleasure Foepie set the hook as his float suddenly stood upright on the surface. I was about to say something, when he looked around at me with a warning in his eye. “Bielie,” he said, “say whatever you wish, but don’t tell me the fish are biting.”