

## The Ollidge (December 2020)

I realised early on the tour would be brief. Negotiations, an appeal to my heritage and trebling the fee convinced the tour guide, Wellington, to take me to the Loveridge house in Hopetown. He was reluctant, but his wife, Betsy, thought the additional amount was worth it. After all, she said, work is work and you shouldn't pull a gift horse by the tail. Ten minutes was the most he would commit to. That will be enough, he said, it's a crap place, there's nothing to see and it's blerrie creepy anyway. He will take me to the room where they said Miss Loveridge died. He will accompany me and will allow ten minutes inside. After that the feeling of loneliness is too much.

The trip to Hopetown had been an arduous one. Earlier in the day I arrived in Upington on the outskirts of the Kalahari Desert, travelled to Hotazel and on to Hopetown. The late November sun was brutal and Hotazel (etymology: 'hot-as-hell') lived up to the moniker. Wellington bundled me into his bakkie and we sped off.

At first glance, the Loveridge house was quaint, even welcoming. I am sure you would agree if you look at the photo—the only one I managed to snap while retreating. My grandfather had bought the house from Miss Loveridge just before she died. His dwelling bordered her property, and his plan was to raze the new acquisition and cultivate fruit trees. But the promise of a healthier life had faded. People in the town had known him well. Mostly from the local public house. They agreed, he came from a long line of alcoholics and the trauma of El-Alamein had only hastened his slide into oblivion. Now, as the sole heir, it was mine. Both his derelict home filled with the memories of long-



The sign reads: "Welcome to Hotazel"



The Loveridge house.

gone ancestors and the adjacent 'haunted house' (they referred to it such) whose soul percolated through the souls of passers-by. No one coveted the Loveridge house after she died. Hopetonians spoke of despair reaching out to all who approached it, willing them in. The evil, children's cries and flashing lights, blue, red and yellow, emanating from deep within. Not from the spectre of Miss Loveridge who laid in her room, decaying for weeks before the stench reached every part of Hopetown. From another, the Ollidge, seeking succour that was her abandoned soul. It feeds on fear and loneliness. One ounce of solitude can sustain the Ollidge for decades Betsy recounted. She watched from behind the overgrowth as we edged towards the door.

We opened the door and passed slowly, silently through an entrance hall, into what could have been a living room of sorts. A musty, grey blanket lay crumpled near the wall. In the dilapidated bathroom, a corpse. A cat, I think. The belly had burst open, or was it ripped. Wellington shuddered, urging me on to the bedroom. To get this over with, just take your photos and let's leave. Miss Loveridge's bedroom faced south-east, away from the setting sun. It was 6 o'clock and the light was feeble. We blinked, adjusting our sight to the darker interior. An old, rusted bed frame. A chest of drawers, the one second from the bottom half open. A few stains littered the cement floor. Miss Loveridge probably died in that bed, mumbled Wellington. I raised my camera in salute, just as a stirring came from the open drawer. I peered in, and there staring back at me, an eye, rising and falling, breathing. I turned to Wellington, but he had left. I was alone. And afraid. I scuttled out, pointing my camera behind me as I retreated through the front door. Wellington was in the cab. We did not speak. But we were not alone.