

Lizardman chronicles:

For motives both well-intentioned and otherwise—all manner of odd ‘Europeans’ (the term Africans apply to all whites) have sojourned in Africa. In my years in Zimbabwe, perhaps I was counted as one. Even so, I maintain that few expats were odder than was my German colleague at a Methodist boarding school near Harare where I worked from 1986-1988.

‘Herr Hund’ (a pseudonym) was a science teacher, about my age, sponsored by a German volunteer organization. The locals knew him to be friendly and generous—however eccentric. Evidence of the latter should be clear in the following journal excerpts from the period of our shaky ‘alliance.’

Further to the nature of his eccentricities: should my adult children read this—they may well be appalled that their parents would have exposed them in infancy to someone as crazy as Herr Hund—AKA, the Lizardman. I can assure them that neither their mother nor I would have tolerated the Lizardman—AKA, the Slaughterman—anywhere near them had we felt he posed any danger. I would also implore them to appreciate that as an expat in an isolated setting—one does not usually have the luxury to choose one’s company.

As for the crazy talk: I cannot deny having been amused by the sheer outrageousness of Herr Hund’s political views and the manner in which he challenged the shibboleths of liberal humanism. At the same time, we were uneasily and mutually dependent—the details of which will be described in the excerpts that follow.

Still in the final reckoning, it was the help extended in a situation of dire need by which both my ex-wife and I will always be indebted to the Lizardman.

-2017



Sept. 26, 1986

Red brigadier in African exile?

Herr Hund, the German physics teacher, has become my jogging comrade of late. After our sweaty jog last evening, he accompanied me back to the living room for a beer where he described his pleasure in killing chickens and expressed interest in forming a "Sandringham School Slaughter Club":

"By the way," he chuckled, pulling his khaki vest across his paunchy midriff, "anytime you have chickens to slaughter—do please let me know."

I could only give him the benefit of the doubt in taking his strange talk as black humour, given his declared admiration for Charles Bukowski.

Yet when he shifted into political topics, he grew more serious. Stiff-shouldered in his khaki vest, he expiated on a range of topics from the French Revolution (*"Robespierre was the only one who could've made it succeed."*) to Soviet military assistance in Ethiopia and the Ogaden war (*"The Soviets used a brilliant strategy airlifting APVs behind Somali lines."*)

In acknowledging his attractions to some elements of Nazi totalitarianism, he frankly admitted:

"Hitler had a good plan. If the dictators could have stuck together, Stalin and Hitler could've made it. The Nazis had some good methods but it was only the crazy part of their ideology that destroyed them. It was only the racism and anti-Semitism that was stupid and created unnecessary problems. If it wasn't for that crazy belief in racial superiority—especially over the Slavs—they could've done their deals with the Russians and with others. They could've forged a strong Axis alliance and they could've succeeded."

In a German staccato rhythm, he went to expiate his darkly Stalinist world view:

"There are moments when revolutionary potential is clear. To hell with the consequences— it may not seem like justice— certainly not to the weak-hearted. It may only be revenge to see a parasite like Herr Flick [a retired German industrialist] torn to pieces by a mob – but in such a moment I would definitely participate."

At that moment the would-be Red brigadier in African exile stopped picking at his Castle lager label and looked up suddenly with a glint of bitterness.

"That's my advantage – being alone without a family. I can participate. No, I don't accept that we all have to work hard and make sacrifices for the benefit of the family with parasites like Flick and Krupp as father figures – it's bullshit!" His pink eyelids twitched as he sneered. "It's a slave mentality I'll never swallow. Especially this bullshit about the model of Japanese capitalism. Jesus!"

Abruptly he belched— a would-be Nietzschean *obermenchen* struck by a spasm of heartburn.

Oct. 28, 1986

Further confessions of the Slaughterman:

The jogging companionship soon extended to Friday night beer and video. When the talk invariably got round to politics, he took particular delight in offending humanist sensibilities:

In his latest monologue (delivered this time after 4 bottles of Castle Pilsner in his cluttered living room) 'the Lizardman' let loose a stream of consciousness about his 'political tourism' in Northern Ireland before segueing into even stranger territory:

"When I got to Belfast, I told some young fellows I met that I was just a German primary school teacher filming for my pupils. An old drunk in a pub took me to 2 youths and they took me to meet a cross-eyed fellow about 40 years old. He took me to meet a real Sinn Fein operative...

...I see the kind of radicalism on the streets of Northern Ireland spreading throughout the West. All it takes is an increase in youth unemployment. 30% or 40% like in Northern Ireland will do it. These people—the ones on the bottom—they are forgotten by the so-called parties of the left. The phony leftist parties just ignore the unemployed or try to sweep them under the carpet. They don't need them. Still, apart from liquidating these undesirables they cannot get rid of them. They are on the streets and their numbers are swelling. It's like a boil that's enlarging and suppurating—it will eventually burst open...

...Even the traditional Marxist parties in the East—they don't understand this radicalism in places like Northern Ireland. Those Communist parties in the Eastern Bloc, they are stuck with their 19th century ideas. They can't explain 20th-century technologies. In the 20th century we're seeing phenomena undreamt of by Marx...

...The Soviets still pretend to uphold this ideal of the working proletariat—the skilled tradesmen. But what kind of revolutionary potential is there in that class? They are, for the most part, '*lumpen*'—like the workers in the West—they have petty bourgeois aspirations, bigger houses, bigger cars and colour TVs. So, the Soviets—with their old ideas—neither understand the mentality of their own workers. They definitely don't understand the social phenomena of alienation and unemployment in the West...

...The Soviet Old Guard is conservative. They're so used to dealing with their opposite number, trading with the big bad corporations of the West—they have no interest in seeing changes in the present world order. They are watching the New York stock exchanges as closely as the General Motors executives. So that's why they sign the agreements in the United Nations along with the Western countries condemning 'terrorism'...

...Oh sure, they pay lip service to the liberation movements around the world, but at heart they fear hijacking and hostage-taking no less than the Western governments. They function as part of the world order—they might like to see the boat rocked a little from the left—but they don't want to see it roll over. Real revolution, a reign of terror by the frustrated, angry and forgotten freaks in the street, now *that* is feared by all the powers that be!

...But it can happen. It's already happening on the streets of Belfast. It can spread to Glasgow, London Paris— even Moscow. Let us wait— we shall see. 20 years from now we can meet and talk about this again...

...The one reason why it might not be such a bad idea to be careful to watch one's diet and so on, is to be around long enough to see how things turn out. Maybe I'll be bitter – maybe I'll think I made all the wrong decisions. We shall see. All these important matters one decides on— whether to start a family or to stay single – they are all gambles...

...But so far, I like my position. I can maneuver— I can be flexible. I don't have dependents to worry about. I can change completely to suit the circumstances. If some revolutionary movement should explode on the streets, I can take part in it. I have only myself to consider.

...My dream is to do to 'the richies'— the fat bourgeoisie – what I do now to the lizards. To torture them slowly and make them beg for mercy— that is satisfaction I dream about!

...Jobs? I don't need to be a teacher when I get back in Germany. I'm already working on a plan—I have contacts. I could get a little technical training and work in industry or I could work in a hospital. My mother's a nurse— she's helping me with this...

...I already told her that only job I would accept in the hospital is to work in the morgue. Like Charles Bukowski, I could be a corpse cleaner— that job I wouldn't mind at all! Not just for the money – 40 marks an hour – but also for the pleasure. Heh! Heh! Just preparing the corpses for autopsies— clamping the jaws and hosing them off. I have plenty of practice already with my lizard dissection!

...Then maybe sometimes you might be alone on the night shift and get some young girl. You could lock the door and have a secret party! Just too bad there are already are enough freaks around to do these jobs— there aren't many of vacancies really— but if you're lucky enough to get one— it's secure— that's one thing. The demand for the service is constant. Ha!"

Throughout his monologue, I listened with a wincing smile as though to a sick-comedy routine. Indeed, the gut-sense was that his rant was more inspired by Bukowski than by Stalin. Apart from his necrophilia fantasies, I cannot deny that his political ideas are *interesting*: interesting perhaps as were the gruesome details of war stories I heard in childhood from another haunted old soldier on the opposing side from Hund's father...



Still, I wondered: *Why in hell was he telling me this?*

He would certainly never dare reveal such dark fantasies to African colleagues let alone his fellow German teachers, Helmut and Ingrid B. Somehow, I must have given him cues that I would not be offended by his twisted ‘humour.’ It also occurred that in keeping with the espionage analogies he uses: he was ‘planting false information’ to test whether I might gossip and betray his confidence.

Meanwhile, there are the practical considerations: he has a driver’s license and no car whereas T. and I have a car and as yet, no driving licenses. He has offered to accompany us on regular shopping trips to Harare and has even extended to us an open invitation to watch TV and videos at his house.

Being stuck together on a rural mission, the mutual benefits of an “alliance” (to use the political terminology he favours) are clear. Still, with wife and baby girl, I have to be very wary of a proud torturer of reptiles.

Almost reminded of the non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler: a devil’s bargain of temporary mutual self-interest.

March 31, 1987

Lunch with the Slaughterman:

As the 'alliance' grew, Herr Hund proposed that we share a portion of our grocery bill, whereby during the school week, he would join us in our noonday meals, usually prepared by Calista, our domestic helper. It was soon afterwards that he would begin sadistically "pushing the boundaries":

"Milk, me-me wants milk," cried my 18-month-old babe as I cradled her on lap before the table. "Thank you cows," she cooed clutching up her pink safety cup.

Bugging out his blue-grey eyes in zombie fashion, the Lizardman stretched out his arms and growled:

"I want to slaughter you, little girl—and drink up your blood!"

T., on the other side of the table, laughed. "O, Hund, she's not a lizard."

I rolled my eyes and patted my daughter's neck: "Tell Mr. Hund that he's had enough fun, honey. Tell them to stop this bogeyman talk – tell him we've had enough silliness for today."

"Slaughter, murder! Torture— heh! " grumbled the Slaughterman. A moment later he was tucking into his apple crumble with soup-strainer mustache twitching.

"You are an excellent cook, T.— even better than Calista. Really this is excellent— far better than an old bastard like me deserves. Ha!"

So once again there is the dilemma: Is the crazy talk just lame sick humour—or is it the ranting of a seriously disturbed man? Despite his generosity—despite his helpfulness in driving the car—how much more of this behavior can we tolerate?

Like a delinquent child, the Lizardman is clearly testing the boundaries.

April 14, 1987

Jekyll and Hyde:

Over lunch today, Comrade Hund was in his Mr. Hyde mood again— growling and bulging his eyes:

"I'm going to slaughter you, little girl. I'm doing to cut up your body and feed it to the rats!"

As my beloved shrieked and toddled out of the living room, the 'bogeyman' lumbered after her with arms raised like Frankenstein's monster. I followed, swooping my baby up.

"Do you play like this with the Bamberger kids?" I seethed, referring to the adopted children of his fellow German Volunteer Service teachers who lived next door. "What about when you were visiting your German pastor on Sunday— did you talk like this?"

"No," he chuckled, "But I was in my Dr. Jekyll mood. Grrrrrr!"

"No, really, I'm serious. How do you think the Bambergers would react if you frightened their kids? You know damn well that would cost you their friendship."

"You're probably right. But then they're not in my pocket, are they?"

"What the *fuck* do you mean by that?" Seething, I hugged M. closer "I've had enough of your fun and games for today..."

He chortled, looking away.

"You are really pushing the limit, man." Part in fury, part in supplication, I stared.

"I know— but I love testing limits."

"You are very, very, close to it, Hund."

He shrugged.

'Tsking' I carried my precious into her bedroom, setting the in her crib with her Fisher Price music box. What self-respect can I claim in putting up with his shit? Does the bastard really think I'm in his pocket? In his own Stalinist parlance: the only question is which of us would have the most to lose from breaking off our uneasy 'alliance?'

May 3, 1987

Coprolite fascism, explained:

"Bet no one ever talked to you like that when you were her age! You were probably spoiled."

After warning the Lizardman for the 20th time stop scaring MT and threatening to fling her pussycat against the wall—a startling revelation burst forth:

"That's absolutely not true, old bugger. I was *never* spoiled. Once when I refused to eat my supper my father made me eat a whole onion."

"Really?"

"Damn right. Once when I was really young – when I shit in my pants— he made me eat it."

"No!"

"Yes, and I understand why he did it. Ha! Fear – that's the only proper way to train children."

He dropped his eyes with a mock smile. Staring at him in silence, I imagined the father, an ex-Nazi soldier, 10 years after the fall of Hitler nursing his bitterness and transferring sadistic frustration onto his son. How many minds of the sons and daughters of *the Wehrmacht* were similarly twisted?

Also, before leaving this afternoon, Herr Hund revealed why he always gave a jerky salute upon entering and leaving the poolside.

"It's in memory of my father," he said, "he drowned when swimming off Tenerife in 1981."

With these revelations, it does not take a psychiatrist to understand the genesis of lizard torture.

June 6, 1987

Blunt words and close call:

There was growing unease that with the acceptance of a loan from Herr Hund, the erstwhile mutual dependence had become lop-sided:



The rotten tire curse continued today with a flat at the Turnpike garage necessitating a change to the bush-patched over-sized inner tube. Even with this danger, Comrade Hund managed to ease the limping Datsun ‘cockroach’ into Harare. There is now no longer any spare tire.

With the car troubles the plans to spend \$2000 on a trip back to Canada in August seem ever more foolhardy. Still, Herr Hund has offered to lend me \$500 for both the car repairs and the air ticket.

I accepted his offer while having no doubt about his expectation that we will sell him the car next year on our departure (which will certainly disappoint Mr. Muposa who arranged the body-work welding in January). If it were only about the car! Far more jarring in unspoken terms of obligation for his favours is the extension of his license for making his ‘playful’ comments.

Moments after accepting the offer as we were walking back to the car on Samora Machel Ave., I made “small talk” by joking about T.’s “vanity purchases” of a dress and cosmetics at Meikles’s Department store that she could have got much cheaper elsewhere.

“If you can’t afford your wife’s spending habits, the solution is simple: get a divorce!”

Stung more by my implicit betrayal of T. by my thoughtless gossip than by his taunting response—I shut up. Joining the ranks of lonely and eccentric bachelors like the Hund—what bleaker fate might be imagined? No, I will gladly bear the “vanity purchases”!



Just an hour thereafter, money worries were put into proper perspective:

Instead of taking the main road back to Norton, we took a back road through the Tynwald commercial farm district. Several kilometers along the narrow dirt road we came upon a raging grass fire. At first it looked that the fire was confined to a small patch, but as soon as we drove into the pall of smoke, we realized that the fire was burning on both sides of the road leaving a gauntlet of flames leaping up on both sides. For more than 1/2 kilometer, Comrade Hund, frozen at the wheel, barreled through. It was a full 45 heart-thudding seconds before emerged from the inferno.

In the mortal fear that lifted as abruptly as it had descended, I looked back at T. Perhaps she was thinking the same as me: precious Baby MT, back alone with Calista might have been left an orphan! As for Hund—he merely cackled.

“The ole bugger nearly surprised us there, Ha!”

So it was, 3 mortals were reprieved to continue spending frivolously, needlessly fretting and torturing a few more lizards.

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June 24, 1987

Heartbreak, narrowly averted:

The delicate pregnancy of my then wife took an alarming turn one morning in her 6th month when she needed emergency attention. She would likely not have got to the hospital on time for our baby to be saved, had it not been for the help of the 'loyal' Hund:

When T. complained of abdominal pain in early morning, I had no sense that it was serious ("Don't worry" I had said, "you'll be seeing the doctor on Saturday.")

Just 20 minutes after I arrived at the school, a student came running to the staffroom with an alarming message: T. was in her headmaster's office doubled up in pain.

I rushed over to the primary school and shepherded her back home—leaving her lying on the sofa, expecting her indisposition to pass. I was in my first class for only 15 minutes when T.'s fellow teacher at the primary school, Mrs. Muposa, was at the classroom door in alarm.

"Mrs. T. is in very great pain," she said.

"Let's not panic yet," I told her "It could be the abdominal stretching pains again."

With T.'s pregnancy having come as a surprise during an exploratory abdominal operation, the doctor had told us there that she would likely experience distress with the stretching of the still healing tissue. But was today's pain to be so dismissed?

I assigned my students some work and with the help of Mrs. Muposa, half-carried T. to the car. She kindly agreed to drive T. to the Chibero College clinic just down the road. I returned to class and awaited the report from the clinic.

Between classes, another student came running to relay Mrs. Muposa's message: the Chibero clinic nurse had recommended that T. see her doctor in Harare as soon as possible. Her condition was serious.

Yet who could drive her to Harare?

In rising panic, I asked several teachers if they could do it. From each I approached I received a similar stone-faced response: with exams so near they couldn't afford to cancel classes.

Finally, I approached Comrade Hund, and just as I had dreaded, he immediately asked if this was a case of hypochondria. When I told him that the alarm had had come from the Chibero nurse, he nodded:

"OK. Give me 10 minutes to assign homework. You tell the principal."

It took 10 minutes of pleading to the principal to get his permission. Meanwhile, the primary school headmaster who had earlier seen T.'s condition in his office did not hesitate.

Mrs. Muposa kindly agreed to accompany T. in the back seat while the Hund drove. Since I would only be taking up space, I stayed behind. As soon as the car was off to Harare, I returned to class somewhat relieved.

Around 1:00 PM the car rolled back into the driveway. The Hund gave his customary salute and pointed back towards Mrs. Muposa before striding away towards the school. Mrs. Muposa walked up to the open door with a grave expression:

"We rushed Mrs. T. into the clinic. We got there just in time. The baby was threatening to miscarry. "

"Omigod!" I bit back tears.

Running over to the Hund's house, I phoned the Avenues clinic and the call was transferred into her room.

"How are you, my love? Please don't worry. You are now under good care. Everything will be all right now."

"I told you it was serious," she croaked, "you never believe me."

At 7:00 PM, I was back at the Hund's place breathlessly clutching his phone, eager for an update.

"May I please speak with Mrs. T.?"

"She's been transferred to the labour ward."

Labour ward? But it's nearly 3 months early!

The labour ward nurse then informed that after a daylong deterioration, the doctor had managed to stabilize T.'s condition. Still, she said, the risks of the poor infant being expelled remained grave. But after only 6 months *en utero* — what chance would it have of survival?

Breathless moments later, the dopey voice of T. herself came over the crackling line.

"It's not my fault," she moaned weakly.

"I know honey," I said my voice beyond control, suddenly cracking. "It's nobody's fault. Just try to relax—try to sleep."

I trudged back home through the dark weighted by a deep sadness.

Poor little baby—if only he/she can pull through!

Quietly turning on the light and leaning over MT's crib, I smoothed the blanket tangled around her legs. She sighed in her sleep as I gently kissed her cheek. Is she to be an only child?



After a fitful night, I called the Avenue's Clinic from the school office. The fear of heart-breaking news was swept away by an incredible reprieve: The labour pains had ceased and T. was soundly sleeping. She might even be well enough to come home tomorrow...

How can a man without religion express hosannas of tearful joy for unexpected mercy and deliverance?

fwt

Oct. 15, 1987

More lizardly politics:

Along with providing a loan that enabled me to travel to Canada (ostensibly to prepare for our immigration), in my absence, Herr Hund drove T. for her doctors' appointments and after my return drove us in to Harare for the baby's delivery.

Whether he knew just how deeply grateful I felt to him, he did not lessen his crazy talk nor cease "pushing the boundaries." The following excerpt describes a mealtime exchange about 6 weeks after the birth of our second daughter:



"Gorbachev will fail," said Herr Hund, chewing through his soup straining moustache, "he's a fucking traitor."

"That may not be what the Russian people think," I countered, ladling another serving of stew.

"*The people?*" scoffed Hund, "Your liberal ass fuckers and lesbians do not think the same way as the *real* people."

"So, I suppose your Stalinist rats are the 'real' people?"

"Me, you— we're all rats. Heh!"

Yet again, the conflict of ideology in political banter resulted in both of us resorting to chew in sullen silence— but not before little MT, on my knee, came pulling on my sleeve:

"I eat up all my *sadza*, daddy. I want some ice-cream."

"Get that shrieking object out of the way," gruffed the Stalinist, "Why don't you put it in a box?"

"Just, wait, honey," I lifted MT onto my knee and hugged her, "and don't listen to Mr. Hund. He's just trying to be silly."

"Sil-ly!" said little MT wrinkling her nose and pointing her finger at the drooping moustache that chewed away in silence.

But later in the evening, upon receiving the news that his Grundig TV was finally repaired and he needed the car to pick it up in Harare, Mr. Hyde reverted to the self-effacing Dr. Jekyll. In oblique excuse for his dinnertime outbursts, he even confessed:

"I couldn't stand it any longer without my TV. Last night I had to play Monopoly by myself."

“Really? How did you manage that?”

“I had the dog play against the capitalist top hat.”

“Who won?”

“I won.”

“Was it the Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde who won?”

“It was the Stalinist dog, of course.” he chuckled. “It *had to* beat the liberal ass fucking top hat!”

fwt

Oct. 29, 1987

At the doorstep of Aelia Capitolina:

As his Dr. Hyde personality seemed to increasingly dominate, it took more effort to remind myself of the moral basis of loyalty to my Stalinist ally:



Pulling into the *Aelia Capitolina* (Hund's name for his house, referencing the Roman garrison in ancient Jerusalem) this afternoon after our latest shopping trip to Harare, the Hund was unmistakably in Mr. Hyde mode.

All afternoon in the sticky heat, he had been silent. At the final stop in the video store where there was nothing new to rent, he began muttering German expletives and slapping the wheel. He lapsed back into sullen silence until we reached the Chibero farm road and then began chanting to himself what sounded like snatches of nursery rhyme: with repetitions of 'slaughter,' and 'lizard'...

As I got out to lift up the back hatch of the Datsun, I thought of all the possible irritants that could be nipping though his hind-brain: in addition to the poor selections at the video shop, there was the poor TV reception of late and the growing algae in the neglected Chibero swimming pool...

Or perhaps he was nursing some personal grievance. Maybe it was my comment that followed his declaration of having slaughtered "a whole family of lizards" yesterday ("Next time," I had caustically replied, "you can even have more fun by pretending you're Himmler selecting undesirables.")

Then there was the fact of T.'s road test coming up within a month. Is the Hund anxious that we will no longer be dependent upon his chauffeuring?

Whatever his irritants, the tension broke as he was unloading his groceries from the boot. When a bag of oranges caught on the bumper of the car and spilled forth—he suddenly went berserk—flinging oranges in all directions and trampling them to pulp as they rolled under foot. As I shook my head at the grotesquely comic spectacle he barked:

"Don't complain. I paid for these. I'll do what I want with them. It's my business."

Feb. 5, 1988

Night at Ngezi Park:

One this rare getaway accompanied by Herr Hund, it was sobering to observe another expat's reaction to behavior that my wife and I had become inured to:



The proposed weekend getaway to a chalet at Ngezi dam was off and on while T., waited for news of her mother's appendix surgery at Macheke hospital in Masvingo. When her sister Peggy phoned with the news that their *amai* was in recovery, T. decided she could wait until next week to drive down to see her mother in Topola.

Thus, it is only at 7:00 PM, along with the last-minute accompaniment of Comrade Hund (and his crate of 24 beer) that we began the bounce south along torturous communal trails towards Ngezi Park. Being off the main road, I drove. Eyes watering, I clutched the wheel for 2 ½ hours until moonrise and the final arrival at the idyllic Mopani Lodge by Ngezi dam, booked for 2 nights by J.H., fellow Canadian and motor mechanics teacher at the Harare technical college.

After rendezvousing with the greying J.H., an old Africa hand (he had once organized disaster relief motor pools in Ethiopia), we drank a few beers and exchanged a few anecdotes under the Coleman kitchen lamp until crashing at midnight.

At 4:00 AM, I jolted up sweating in the full moonlight, anxious that J.H. was irritated that we should have invited along Comrade Hund, given his offensive drunk talk as we sat around the table:

"I'd love to fuck that gook skeleton against a wall mattress!" he had said, referring to the Filipina wife, who along with her husband was sponsored by the same Canadian NGO as J.H. and I.

In noting J.H.'s wincing at Herr Hund's crazy talk, I wondered whether he might pass on this anecdote to the field staff office. Just what I need when I am desperate for a decent job reference!

Feb. 22, 1988

The rat at the wheel:

I am still shamed to recall the following incident recorded in my journal. There can be no defense of, or rationalization for, the failure to more forcefully stand up to Herr Hund's sadistic bullying:



Driving west from Harare in the growing dark, Comrade Hund, chewed gum at the wheel, reached back and grabbed his loaf of German black bread from the rear seat:

“Your baby might piss on it,” he growled.

At that moment, T. pulled baby TE away from her breast whereupon the baby thrashed and wailed.

“Shut up, meat supply,” growled the Slaughterman.

“That’s fucking enough,” I snapped, “unless you want to walk back from here.” I was in no mood for his sick jokes about T. and I living under a bridge in Canada next year or being forced into cannibalism.

“Ha ha!” snorted the Slaughterman. “If I gave you enough money, you’d let me do what I liked with the kid.”

“Are you crazy? If you or anyone else ever tried to harm my kids—I’d tear them apart,” I caught his eye. “I’m serious, Hund. “Do you want to stop the car right here and get out?”

“It’s just a joke,” piped up T. from the back seat.

The Slaughterman laughed. “Yes, calm down old bugger. Don’t take it personally.”

“No more ‘jokes’, OK?”

“Listen, I’m just making the point that man is a rat. Everyone has a price. If is not money—it’s something else. For you—I don’t know. Teenie girls, maybe?”

“Bullshit! So, what’s your price—a few lizards?”

“Depends on how many. But having a Flick or a Krupp to torture: that would be worth far more than this rat’s little soul.”

Still fuming, I stared straight ahead while he munched on the black bread.

“Ah, fuck!” He pointed the heel of the loaf towards the sunset glowing through the side window. “Fuck, this is a beautiful country! I just hate to have to go back among the

crazy cunts in Germany next year. But if I'm not going to eat out of the garbage cans, I need that goddam computer course. Fuck!"

A moment later we approached the Chibero dam and as always, he gave his stiff salute to his late father as we rattled past.

I twisted round; eyebrows raised to T.

Jostling the babe, now sleeping, she sweetly smiled.

What harm can she possibly see in his 'silly talk'? It was the Hund, after all, who drove her to the hospital in dire need when her own husband, without a driver's license, was unable to help.

fwt

Mar. 10, 1988

The alliance unraveling?

Perhaps it was the stir-craziness of semi-isolation by which Herr Hund periodically lashed out at fellow 'inmates' in close quarters. In some of these more sordid episodes, I am reminded of the Sartean advisory: "Hell is other people."

The growing testiness with Herr Hund, was further stoked today a near confrontation in the staff room. When I approached his desk to ask whether he wanted to accompany T. and I to the grocery in Norton after school, he seemed annoyed by my interruption. Looking up from his *Soviet Military Review* mag, he gruffed: "Only if you make it quick!"

Ignoring the presence of the teatime colleagues, I snarled back: " What's eating you? Fucking asshole!"

To the amusement of the Zimbabwean tea-drinkers at the table (even including the fellow Canadian and his Filipina wife), I flapped indignantly away.

Still, at 3:30 PM after class—the Lizardman, predictably enough—was standing by the road sheepishly lifting his hand as we edged up to the school gate.

After being picked up, he immediately went into rat mode drawing forth a \$5 bill for petrol, obviously intending to smooth the chicken's ruffled feathers.

Still, it was a tense 20-minute drive. While T. at the wheel, maintained her calm demeanor, on the passenger side I stared icily ahead. Squeezed into the right side in the back seat away from M., "the big bad Wolf", growled in sadistic amusement.

In the spirit of Heinrich Hoffman's sadistic German fairy tales which he once recommended—he wiggled his fingers like scissors as MT squealed and pushed further away in her seat.

"Why don't you soak her dress with petrol and make a human torch?" He chortled to T., who 'tsked' and chuckled:

"O, Hund, we'll have to try that on you first!"

"You really are insane," I muttered to the window.

"Maybe I am old bugger," he cackled, "maybe I am."

Still, I restrained the words on the tip of my tongue: '*Nazi swine!*'

Once uttered—*that* comment would never be forgiven.



Later in the evening, with the babes in bed, T. and I watched the TV mini-series about Polish Jewry during the Holocaust, I 'tsked' as the Nazi officer declared to his helpless prisoners:

"I can rely on you to follow my orders, Jews. If not—I kill your children – even animals love their children."

"Hund would love this," I murmured, "the crazy bastard!"

From the other side of the sofa, my wife nodded sleepily.

Staring at the TV, I wondered again whether T.'s still limited English shields her from the vicious perversity of the Lizardman's 'jokes'... As much he plays the fool— as much as he assumes his self-effacing low-life act licenses him to break taboos— he is flirting more with Mengele than with Bukowski.

The question is: how much longer can we put up with being guinea pigs in his sadistic experiment of "testing limits?"

Mar. 18, 1988

Out of the pocket?

Among Herr Hund's eccentricities was a virulent hatred of the British, ostensibly based on his support for the IRA. We were setting off on the regular Friday shopping trip to Harare when the limit of tolerance was finally reached:



I was behind the wheel with the intention of driving from the school up to the Harare road turn-off before T., with her newly minted driver's license took over behind the wheel. The 'cockroach' (the Lizardman's nickname for our Datsun 210) was bouncing toward the school gate when I glimpsed Miss R., the recently posted British chemistry teacher, shouldering her pack by the turnoff. As I pulled over, the mad Hund beside me howled:

"Don't pick up that white cunt! I'm not going with her. No!"

"Com'on, don't be so goddamn paranoiac. She's a staff member."

I took a deep breath as T. pushed the back door and the blonde girl started to crawl inside.

"Okay, I'm not going," shouted Herr Hund. "Let me out!"

"That's fine with me," said Miss R., flatly, well knowing the Hund's strange antipathy towards her. As she started to hop back out, T. touched her arm. "No, no, Miss R. You are definitely welcome."

With a 'tsk' she slid back into the backseat beside T. On the front passenger's side, Hund fumbled red-faced with his satchel of videocassettes. "Here," he pleaded with Mr. Muzenda, the student teacher who sat awkwardly between the two. "Here – can you deliver these videos to Avondale for me? I'll give you 10 bucks plus taxi fare, OK?"

The young man nodded timidly.

A moment later, still clutching the on the door handle, the Lizardman changed his mind:

"OK, OK," he grunted, "I'll go this time. I got to return these videos myself. But this is the last time!"

In nearing the end of the Chibero Road the Lizardman suddenly broke the suffocating silence:

"You know what this means, of course," He growled, "you know the cost of this? The alliance is now finished. Don't discount the advantages you have from me. Don't think you are not losing a lot by this decision."

While 'the rat' no doubt expected that 'the chicken' (the nickname for me he sometimes mutters) would plead for mercy, in a show of nonchalance, I said:

"What decision?"

"No need for bullshit," he gruffed, "You know what I mean."

"Look, Hund, what's wrong with giving a staff member a lift? This is T.'s car, too. You can't decide who we can or can't pick up in *our* car. *That's bullshit!*"

The jam-packed Datsun bounced in embarrassed silence to the Norton turnoff where I pulled over for T. to take the wheel (Might her faint smile have suggested that for once she was impressed with my show of resolve?) The Hund got into the back on the opposite side of Miss R. with Mr. Muzenda awkwardly between them. He pressed his face to the side window, grunting and muttering in German.

So, is this really an end to the Slaughterman's loans, the use of his telephone, his chauffeuring, the borrowing of his *Newsweek* magazines, watching his VCR; the shared meals? Yes, while all this will certainly be missed— perhaps I should consider the toll of self-respect in allowing a sadistic Stalinist to believe he had me in his pocket!

Mar. 25, 1988

Strategic retreat?

Through the week following the incident with Miss R., Herr Hund must have carefully calculated the difficulty of losing regular transportation to Harare. He obviously determined that keeping 'the alliance' was worth a few mouthfuls of crow:



"I guess this is your car. But if you pick up the fat British bitch don't ask me to drive."

Through the week, Hund did not show up for lunch. We did not even exchange a word from our opposite ends of the staffroom until yesterday afternoon when he asked if he could accompany us to Harare today, adding "Don't worry, it'll be the last time."

Yet when we picked him up at the corner of the gate (instead of driving, as customary to the door of *Aelia Capitolina*) we were in for a surprise:

"Well, this is your car," he said sheepishly as we drove through the gate. "I guess you can choose who you pick up. Maybe the rat went overboard, heh?"

Perhaps it was more of a strategic retreat than an apology but when I looked back at T., she was nodding her approval.

"So, we go back to business as usual, then?" he asked.

By the return journey, the discussion turned to the resumption of weekday lunches and VCR loans.

Just as the T. had shrewdly predicted: in calculating self-interest, 'the rat' would swallow his pride and come crawling back.

"Remember how he acted during the Monopoly game?" T. said later. "He's just like a little boy."

Apr. 15, 1988

Brushes with the tame and with the wild:

Tensions in the ‘alliance’ eased in the final months. Considering his oft declared view of human nature, I assumed that the easing had much to do with our offer to sell him our car upon departure. Well knowing that it was near impossible to find a decent used car in Zimbabwe at that time and that we had had multiple offers on the Datsun ‘cockroach’—I assumed his generosity was calculated on this matter. To use the expression he once translated from the German: he felt he had to “give sugar to the monkey”:

On a rare weekend afternoon outing, we visited the Lion Park passed countless times on the Harare road. Almost immediately depressed by the spectacle of fly-tormented lions pacing in cramped cages, we repaired to the adjoining Lake McIlwaine mini-game park. We took a few photos of the ostriches and elephants in the somewhat more humane pens. Then while T. waited with the baby in the snack bar, with MT on my shoulders, Hund and I walked to the barn to ask about the horseback riding. It wasn’t cheap (\$20 an hour) but it was probably the last chance. Hund insisted on paying.

My mare, called Bonsella, was so tame that little MT, cradled on the saddle before me, was soon dozing. Ahead of us Comrade Hund on his brown gelding followed our khaki-uniformed guide on his white mount. Over the next hour, we ambled along the trail around the lake. At one point, we even approached 2 semi-tame rhinos that oddly tagged after us for 50 metres through long grass. Meanwhile, the Hund’s beaming smile suggested the rapture of a Selous Scout adventure fantasy.

As we circled back to the stables in the slanting Capricorn sun, it occurred that a few years hence, little MT, growing up in the drabness of North America, will hardly believe that once she rode on the back of a horse in an African veld right up to the side of an ear-wiggling rhino. After that, she might even be lucky to see the automaton creatures of the savanna from the boat ride through the Wild Kingdom at Disneyland.

“Ah, Africa— it is such bullshit that anyone would choose to leave all this!” the Hund said on the drive back to Chibero. Although he still has more than a year to go in his contract, it was no surprise that he had been having similar wistful thoughts.



The following day:

While still in the afterglow of yesterday’s horseback ride, an encounter with wildlife at the Chibero swimming pool this afternoon was less than idyllic:

We were changing after the swim, when Joseph, the Chibero college maintenance worker in ragged blue coveralls, suddenly stopped not far from where I was sitting with little MT on lap.

“Careful!” he warned pointing the end of his cleaning net into the clump of grass not 2 metres away. It was a small puff adder wiggling towards the edge of the pool.

“Let me do it!” Picking up a stone, Comrade Hund rushed eagerly forward:

Holding M. tightly, I jumped away as the Hund slammed down the rock. For a few seconds, we watched the end of the snake’s tail shuddering from beneath the stone.

“The young ones— said Joseph, still poised defensively with his net, “they are also dangerous. My God!”

Herr Hund cackled. “Yeah, maybe the old bugger up there is giving us another message!”

fwt

May 5, 1988

Compassionate Zombie:

The following excerpt gives an account of a rare occasion when I was not inclined to be cynical about the motives of Herr Hund's generosity:

I was crouched at the foot of the crib after lunch chanting a nursery rhyme along with my laughing babes, when I was startled by the voice from behind.

“Baaaahhh!”

It was the Hund playing zombie, stalking down the hallway with his eyes bugged out and arms outstretched.

M. gave a squeal and darted off for the corner. Baby TE, sitting on the floor, burst into tears. I swooped her up and turned sharply around:

"There, there, sweetie. Jesus, Hund— be careful— you're scaring her!" Rocking the baby, I nodded towards her bandaged foot. "She's in no mood for a boogeyman. She got a bad burn on her foot yesterday. She kicked against the hot iron when Calista was ironing on the bed."

"What?" He gruffed, "you say the meat supply isn't feeling well?"

"Get fucking serious!" I snarled hugged my daughter tightly as she squealed.

Meanwhile, the Hund, muttering to himself, headed back to the living room. I could hear T.'s voice, presumably telling him about baby TE's accident.

“Nazi asshole!” I said, barely out of earshot.

At 8:00 PM, T. and I were watching TV when we were jolted by a sharp rap on the door.

"Who's there?"

It was the Hund stepping in from the dark with a cellophane packet in hand.

“These are special burn bandages from my medical kit. Guaranteed sterile. I don't want to see your little one crawling around with one of those dirty bandages from the local clinic.”

So yet again, I was surprised and even a little contrite. Dare the Stalinist admit that he can occasionally succumb to empathy? As T. intuits far better than I: the generosity of Comrade Hund cannot be merely transactional...

July 29, 1988

Last video night at the 'Aelia Capitolina':

These final notes were taken just a few days before Herr Hund left on vacation for Germany and we left the school permanently in preparation for 'emigrating' to Canada. It seemed on this evening that his attitude was as close to "bourgeois sentimentality" as he had ever come:

"So, what did old Joe try to sleaze out of you?" asked Herr Hund as I leaned forward on his termite ravaged armchair.

He was referring to the price paid by Mr. Muposa for the battery charger and typewriter.

"What a fucking zombie!" He gave his familiar snort of scorn.

"Cheers." Before popping open my own can, I handed him one of the Amstrel beers, lugged across the Kalahari Desert from Gabarone where T. and I had gone last week to process her landed immigrant visa.

"No appreciation of limits, old Joe."

I was tempted to remind the Hund that Muposa had as much a claim on the car as did he. It was Joe Muposa who after all had arranged the bodywork that gave the cockroach a second life. Then what of Mrs. Muposa? Did she not help T. as much as the Hund on that day when T. nearly had a miscarriage?

Still, that is all settled with ownership of the cockroach now transferred to the Hund's name.

"Shit!" he gruffed, settling down the beer can to wobble the cables and fiddle with the VCR tracking controls.

As I stared at the fluttering screen, I thought of his cynical maxims: "*A deal is a deal*", "*don't push too far*", and the penultimate: "*Man is a rat.*"

Given this was our last Friday night of beer and video, I wondered whether he, too, was feeling a little sentimental.

Still, with the boring movie and 3 beers, by the time the screen went blank I was dozing.

"Old bugger!" he barked, shuffling the video back in the case.

"Sorry," I stumbled up from the chair reaching for my flashlight. With the weak batteries I had to shake it just to get a feeble light.

"Let's go together," he gruffed.

Moments later, we were crossing the pitch-black field lying between the school dormitories and the school office guided by the beam of his German military surplus flashlight.

“So is T. still worried about this superstitious bullshit?”

I winced in his reference to the ongoing issue about which a few times I’d taken him in confidence: the *lobola*. [bride price].

“Yeah, her father’s not letting up on the making her feel guilty. The week we spend at the farm before leaving is going to be tough.”

We walked on in silence for a moment in the moonless dark. Then the Lizardman said in a tone a little less gruff than the familiar:

“It will be good for her to get out of this environment. Away from these vultures—her guilt will disappear. But once you’re there, don’t get any crazy ideas of wasting money on bullshit psychiatrists, either. That would be ridiculous.”

I laughed. “No, no—even if we had the money to piss away, I’d go to a *n’anga* before a goddam head-shrink. Seriously though, it’s going to be tough for T. No getting around that. If it wasn’t for the girls—we’d probably stay here. I dunno.”

I was braced for some cackle about not needing to worry about eating as long as we had our “meat supply” in our next home under a bridge. Instead, he only yawned.

“OK, then we leave at 1100 hours tomorrow for Harare?” he said using the military terminology he favoured.

“Roger,” I said.

“Goddam, I’m tired!” With another yawn the Lizardman headed back to the *Aelia Capitolina*, the beam of his military flashlight joggling ahead.



Postscript:

After we sold Herr Hund our car—in a final act that belied Machiavellian self-interest he let us use it for another week.

Also belying Stalinist self-interest, he kept in touch for several years afterwards. His sporadic tape letters included lengthy rants on global affairs from a dark Stalinist perspective, interspersed with autobiographical updates:

After finishing his contract in Zimbabwe, he unhappily returned to Germany just long enough to procure another volunteer teaching position at a college in Lesotho. Much to the surprise of my ex-wife and I, he married his Sotho school secretary with whom he eventually had 2 daughters.

Years later, he returned to Germany where he struggled to find a decently paying teaching job, bitterly citing the age discrimination he faced. Like me, he would eventually divorce.

On a New Years' Day a few years ago, we chatted on Skype at his ex-wife's place (he himself eschewing home internet). He railed against the Christian Democrat government and its immigration policy. He bewailed that due to the betrayal of workers like himself by "government elites beholden to feminists", he was saddled with enormous child support and spousal maintenance costs. So burdened, he thought it unlikely he would reach the retirement age of 68. The call ended with a paranoid coda about surveillance and an announcement of his intention to "go permanently off the grid..."

It would certainly be interesting to hear his take on Trump and the right-wing nationalists of that ilk—but again, he is presumably now entirely off the grid. I did try recently to connect with him through his ex-wife's email but received no reply.

However noxious his politics—my indebtedness remains. The Lizardman effectively saved my daughter TE's life. However outrageously he tested limits—he was a friend. It is hard not to miss him.

(1986-1988 Chibero, Zimbabwe (From black hard cover notebook, transcribed 2017).