

1988 Chibero journal excerpts #1 (January-May)

Seven years after leaving Tanzania, I neared the end of my teaching contract in Zimbabwe, with far greater stakes in what came next than I had as a younger single man. The prospect of returning to Canada without definite job prospects seemed like a high-wire act without a net. Still, the gut sense was that for the sake of our little daughters, I had to take the gamble...

Understandably, my wife was ambivalent about emigration. The prospect of separation from home and family was an enormous sacrifice for her. Hence, the final months before departure were tense...



January 3

In visiting Hunyani Poort dam, T. and I amid other strolling couples clomped down the narrow steps leading to the bottom of the dam. Amid the chirpings of twilight and blossomed walkways, I regretted not having sooner discovered this oasis of tranquility just 30 kms. from our front door in Chibero.

On the bottom steps, I turned around to hand the camera to T. who took little MT's hand and carefully eased the 4-month-old baby TE into the crook of my arm.

I was looking over at the dry spillway to the right when I tripped. In instantaneous horror of falling forward with the baby on the stone walkway, I twisted to recover balance. Too late, I toppled forward. Even with the babe clutched close to chest, her little head grazed the ground. With legs splayed out and babe on my lap, I felt her head for any sign of injury. She began to wail as T. rushed up.

"You fool," she shouted. "You could have killed my child!"

"She's OK," I said. "She's just scared." Shamed before onlookers, I eased the screeching babe back into T.'s arms.

"She'll have a bruise!" tsked, T., fingering a red spot on the infant's forehead. For her part, my little daughter wailed on. Her brown eyes seemed to roll back towards me.

'*Forgive me Darling*,' I silently beseeched...

January 7

T. was breast-feeding on the other side of the sofa when suddenly the baby pulled loose and spat up.

"Quick, run the bathroom!" T. cried, "Bring a washcloth and the nappy pins!"

I hopped up, fetched the items and was back within 15 seconds.

"Where's the nappies?" T. growled, snatching the washcloth.

"You didn't ask for them."

"How could I not need both? Stupid! Take the baby." Holding out little TE in one arm, she furiously wiped the damp patches on her blouse.

Bristling from staccato commands, I snapped back:

"You don't have to talk to me like a drill sergeant, goddammit! Try a little politeness for a change."

Pulling back the baby from my reach, she got up and stormed into the bedroom. The door slammed.

I took the empty place on the sofa and picked up a '*National Geographic*'. Almost immediately hearing a cry, I jumped up and made for the hallway. From behind the closed door, T.'s sobs gathered rhythm.

When I opened the door, she looked up from the bed where she sat with little TE on her lap. She was dabbing tears with the washcloth.

"What the hell's wrong?" I said,

"Someday you'll regret this," my wife gulped, "You'll miss me."

January 10



Just after dark around 7:00 PM, the rain began falling. T. was in the bathtub and I was just coming out the bathroom door after scrubbing her back. Wet-sleeved, I left T. lying in the suds, softly singing to herself. Before changing my shirt, I checked on the babes already in repose in their cribs...

The 2-year-old's slender arm was over the younger's chubbier one and the tiny hand of the 4-month-old touched her elder sister's head. As their shoulders almost imperceptibly rose and fell

in breathing, the rain drummed louder on the zinc roof... In a shudder of warmth, I embedded the image into the amber of permanent memory...

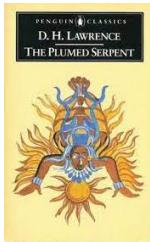
January 11

Natural aversion?

"Did you see my grey hat?" I asked Calista this morning when she was doing laundry at the sink.

"I don't know, *baba*," sourly mouthed our domestic helper. With every word, she more roughly scrubbed.

For a moment I stood in the kitchen doorway trying to take measure of Calista's mood. With T. taking responsibility for her employment and with her English very limited, I rarely addressed Calista at all. Today, I sensed a deeper than usual unease.



I know almost nothing about Calista except what my wife tells me. She is roughly in her late 30s, a 'divorced' (more likely never married) mother from the Chibero village. She has an 8-year-old daughter who attends the primary school where T. teaches. I know that is unhappy with her pay—which T. insists is more generous than the going rate that other Zimbabwean teachers pay for domestic help.

Of course, I feel guilty having a domestic worker at all. Our dependence on Calista in these last few months will surely make a transition to living in Canada even harder for T...

Amid such considerations I still sense that Calista's unease in my presence is stirred by something deeper. Perhaps like so many Zimbabweans (my wife included) she has some terrifying memories of Rhodesian whites from the bad old days...

At the same time, there comes to mind an observation about intercultural mistrust in an essay by D.H. Lawrence. In noting the attitudes many of his cowboy neighbours in New Mexico bore against the native American tribes whose land they occupied, Lawrence maintained that suspicion—even hostility—towards profoundly different cultures comes natural to many "healthy white western males". He suggested that a corresponding repulsion of the native Indian to the white settler was equally "natural"...

If there is any truth to such a pessimistic view of human nature—its relevance seemed to fit the moment this morning. Before turning from the kitchen doorway, it seemed 'natural' that a rural African woman like Calista should have an aversion to the odour of white flesh...

January 12

First assembly of the new term:

Worked up by a few Methodist hymns, the student body clapped hands rhythmically as the teachers walked onto the stage. The rafters then shivered with another rousing Methodist number before Mr. Limo at the podium, turned to the teachers squeezed into the chairs behind him. This was the moment the students were waiting for: the introduction of teaching staff for the new school year.

Each teacher, both new and continuing, were motioned to stand up in turn (“*like prize breeding stock in a cattle auction*”, said Comrade Hund, afterwards). The principal identified each to the students’ applause.

There was some fidgeting, particularly among the expatriate staff— now 3 German, 3 Brit, 2 Canadian and a Filipino. Would there be murmured disapproval? Chortles of scorn?

In bracing for my turn to stand up, I remembered the speech given at the Parents’ Day last term by a fat-bellied cabinet minister. In scorching Mugabe-style invective delivered in Shona (afterwards translated by T.), he accused western countries of dumping not only expired pharmaceuticals, but “reject teachers” in Zimbabwe. The nation’s own better qualified teachers, he claimed, could scarcely find work due to the “colonial mentality” of assuming white teachers were somehow superior...

What a turnaround it was from the government’s warm embrace of western teachers 6 years ago! In any case, the speech of the Mugabe stooge was met by respectful applause mingled with a few nervous titters...

Next in turn, I wondered whether I should smile, look at the principal—or look out at the students. Should I hold my hand ‘casually’ on the forward chair or behind my back?

Hearing my name, I jerked up with a rictus grin and nodded. To my relief there was polite applause— no more restrained than that afforded the other expats...

January 16

The most disturbing article in the latest *Guardian Weekly*, related to the plight of many African American men. A vicious cycle was delineated whereby unskilled black men were unable to support a family so then declined paternal responsibility for the children they sired. It was the expression “unemployable” that particularly seized my attention...

With the plans to parachute to Canada upon expiry of my contract in August, what are the chances on the job market? Should I fail to find a decent job before our little nest egg disappears, what would become of us? Is it fair that I should be putting T. and the girls at risk in such a cold place? Would we not be better off staying here?

Queasy with uncertainty, I threw down the paper and went to bed.

T., still awake, told me of her first day of term at the primary school. She said she was deeply touched by the plight of a temporary teacher, "a poor disabled chap" who showed up assuming he had a job. Yet also in attendance was a district education officer who brought along a less qualified relative to replace the disabled fellow.

"It was so unfair," T. murmured. "After he'd already finished writing up his scheme of work. It was so sad to see him on his bicycle pedaling away with his twisted foot and old briefcase..."

January 18

First time, holding breath:



2½-year-old MT, clutched my neck in the shallow end of the Chibero pool, With a chattering nod and squeal of delight, she accepted my invitation to duck our heads underwater together on the count of 3.

Several times, I mimicked the taking of a deep breath and holding it. When I assumed she was ready, I counted 1-2-3 then gently bobbed her under. In the 2 seconds in murky aquamarine, she was pop-eyed— but holding her breath. When we broke surface, she shook her head and scratched her nose but did not cough.

"Let's do it again daddy!" She squealed after catching her breath. "I want mummy to see!"

T. came close to the edge of the pool to watch us as we bobbed through another countdown.

At that same instant, an image flashed up of a 5-year-old crouching before a zinc bucket of icy water drawn from the farmyard pump of the grandfather's farmhouse in the St. John River Valley of New Brunswick. That child braced himself, held his nose and pushed in his head.

From that moment forward, he lost all fear of swimming underwater...

January 19



I woke at midnight, haunted by images of the derelict and the homeless.

Sleepless in the dark, I recalled the first days in Vancouver, *circa* July 1974. Arriving at the Pacific Central station after a 4 day cross-country train journey, I stepped out into the squalor of Main Street. Anchored for the first week in the Pacific Hotel in the heart of skid row, I beat the

streets to orient myself while combing the *Vancouver Sun* and job boards of the Canada Manpower Centre. Night-clerk, carpark attendant; flyer distributor—the prospects looked dim...

Although becoming a fixture on Main Street obviously takes some time—by the end of the week, I was recognized by some of the *habitués*. Particularly unsettling was the nod of fellowship of a one-legged logger who'd bobbed past me several times on crutches...

In terms of our resources, at that moment there was no barrier between me and the native Indians, the heroin addicts and the beer parlour whores... However unsettling, I could not deny a kinship. Yet I got a lucky shake.

Down to my last \$5 bill, I found a job lugging books in the stacks of the public library. It was close to minimum wage but enough to afford a bedsitting room in the west end...

Still, haunted by the skin-of-the-teeth evasion of grimmer outcomes—for months afterwards, I was drawn to take lonely walks around Hastings and Main. Some nights, I could almost catch a doppelganger self—flitting among those shadows...

January 28

There is no rule that obliges teachers to take their tea-break in the staffroom—but teachers rarely miss. Meanwhile, the gathering allows the principal to saunter out from his office. Although Mr. Limo likes to take the staff temperature on issues of the day, as a lay-Methodist preacher he genuinely enjoys the company...

This morning I slinked into the staff room after tea-break, realizing I had missed another impromptu meeting. With all chairs occupied, I leaned back against the corner duplicating table. Miss W., the British Methodist missionary, shot me a look, then lowered her eyes. Deputy Head Banda scowled.

Mr. Limo was concluding his remarks seemingly related to the tidiness of school uniforms. Within seconds, he was clearing his throat, chairs were squawking backwards and the teachers scrambling to get ready for the upcoming period. In passing Mr. Banda, standing stiffly by the door his cubbyhole office, I received another of his reserve police officer's scowls...

I well understand that not taking tea break in the staffroom is bad politics. Yet with departure drawing closer, I have been less inclined to make the effort. Meanwhile, in becoming ever more disinclined to start the day with a Methodist prayer and hymn sing, I have been missing the morning assembly. Those absences have not gone unnoticed any less than those from teatime gatherings...

Regarding the latter, it is certainly not chit-chat with Zimbabwean teachers that I would ever wish to avoid. As for the society of all 6 of my fellow *warungu* colleagues—that is a different story... Perhaps it is weariness with expat life in general. Whatever drives the aversion, I am becoming ever more cynical in observing the variety of expat approaches to the service of self-interest...

Comrade Hund is notably frank about his own efforts to ingratiate himself with the locals. He often lends money to the younger teachers or cheaply sells electronic goodies brought back from

Germany... Miss R. the Physics teacher in her early 20s, seems to rely on her blonde hair and 'innocent' smile for negotiations. Then there is the puppy-dog obsequious approach of fellow Canadians, Mr. M. and his Philippines-born wife— always first in line for the tea-time biscuits...

So, what has been my style for adapting to expat life? It has certainly changed over the years with my changing circumstances.... At this late stage, perhaps I dangerously assume that the responsibilities of marriage to a Zimbabwean protects me from suspicions about my unsociability... Why not compromise a little? In the end, it won't be the extra classes or exam results that will leave a mark of my passage here...

January 30

As T. picked the paper labels off the gleaming new ovenware on the cluttered kitchen counter, I suddenly exploded:

"How much did those cost?"

She held up the tags: \$10.98 for the pot and \$37.50 for the roaster.

"Jesus H. Christ!" I roared. "And you buy these along with the new bedspread? Don't you realize we're leaving here in 6 months? "

She did not—as expected— lash back. A little chastened by her silence, I continued more softly.

"Okay, They're nice pots. And the bedspread is nice too, too. We could have used them in the last 2 ½ years. But honestly, why do you need to buy new stuff just 5 months before we leave?"

She remained silent, still picking at the labels.

"Honestly, T. we'll need every cent we can save until I find a job in Canada. If you could start saving too, then maybe I could get more sleep at night."

She dropped the pot with a clang on the counter. Blinking stonily, she turned toward the bedroom.

"I just wish you weren't so—I don't know," I called after her. "I just wish you weren't—"

The bedroom door slammed. I twisted around towards the front door. Stepping outside, I counted out 10 deep draughts of the heavy night air.



February 2

Among the handful of options considered for a career change upon return to Canada, is that of becoming an international student advisor... In a list of advisory offices of universities obtained in Canada last August, I recognized the name of one J.K. at Brock university in Ontario. He was the fellow whom I had replaced at the secondary school in northern Nigeria where I was first posted with CUSO. I briefly corresponded with him before departure to Kano in January, '77.

Although recalling the insipid advice he offered about living in Nigeria when we last corresponded back in the fall of '76, I sent him a letter at the Brock University address. Along with the greeting, I asked about the possibilities of "breaking into" (I used that silly phrase) the student advisory field...

A return letter from Brock University landed in my pigeonhole today— less than 3 weeks after I sent my enquiry. J.K., obviously at ease in dispensing advice, provided me nearly 2 single-spaced typed pages:

After offering well wishes, he discouraged any notion that positions such as he occupied were commonly available. When such coveted jobs did come up (presumably only on retirements of death), he informed that they usually went to insiders. It was no coincidence, of course, that Brock U. has been his undergrad *alma mater*.

He went on to write of prospects in the teaching field: '*In Ontario, the competition for places in teachers' college training is brutal.*' He then strongly advised that I avoid pursuing ESL work, which he noted was: "*mostly conducted by fly-by-night private colleges and paid exploitatively low wages.*"

Cordially as it was delivered, there was no mistaking the warning: a person in my situation best be braced a rocky re-entry... Still, it was generous of J.K. to reply—the first received for any letter of enquiry thus far sent forth. A letter to CARE Canada director Dr. J.W.—possibly my best hope—is yet to be sent...

Recalling convivial chats at his place in Harare back in early '82, I believe my former Field Staff Officer, could offer leads to job-prospects in Ottawa... Even with the harshness of the winters, our chances there might be better there than on the west coast— thousands of kilometers away from the international aid NGO bureaucracy...

Still, I wonder whether hopes invested in Dr. J.W. are borne of desperation. In such regard, I recall Orwell's '1984' in which the protagonist, Winston Smith, an alienated worker of the 'outer party', fantasizes that 'the inner party' functionary, O'Brien, is an ally... He does not discover the truth until O'Brien enters his jail cell as his *auto-de-fe* confessor...



February 9

Postcard from companera:

The postcard received today from Valparaiso, Chile, was a wonderful surprise. It was from old Chilean comrade from Tanzania days, Adriana B. Up to now, I had only her address in the UK. Fortunately, my last letter was forwarded to her...

The last sight of Adriana was at the bus station in Oxford on New Year's Eve, 1984. She was bidding farewell to T. and I (newly married) who had visited her for a night in route to Canada. The last thing she said in her parting hug was: "*you take care of that young girl, F.!*"

In her last letter received more than a year ago, she said she was looking forward to returning to Chile after her long exile in England. Since that time, the Pope has visited Chile and reportedly urged Pinochet to make democratic reforms. Even though Adriana was imprisoned and tortured by Pinochet goons, she obviously felt it was safe enough to go home...

In her message squeezed into the back of the postcard she assured: "*We may never see one another again but friendship is like a magic bridge.*"

She expressed her delight in hearing that T. and I have 2 daughters. Still, she gently chided:

"Why do you intend to move with your family to Canada? With the climate, the culture—your children will be forever strangers. And there they can make their unique contribution to the new Africa of the future."

Even in the depth of gratitude for her friendship, I was jarred. If someone on the humanist left thinks that a family in our situation should remain in Africa—what might we expect from the majority 'right'?



Later in the afternoon in the living room sofa, I held up the postcard and called out to little MT, playing in the hallway with her mini-bricks:

"Are you African or Canadian, my love?"

"African," said our precocious 2½ year old. "I'm making a house only out of the yellow ones." She held up a mini-brick.

"Don't you want to go in the airplane back to Canada?"

"No-ooo, I want to stay with *ambuya*."

Out of the mouths of babes! Eyes moistening, I flicked the panoramic vista of Valparaiso harbour in the African light....

February 14



Around 4:30 PM, the Datsun pulled in under the canopy. I ran outside just as T. was opening the back seat where baby TE was propped in the white plastic baby seat. All morning, I had been on tenterhooks, thinking of her 3-hour drive alone with the baby (MT staying behind) back from the weekend at her family farm.

“How was Topola, honey?” I hugged her from the back. When she turned around, I was stung by the tightness in her face.

“It was terrible.”

“Terrible?”

Holding the seat with the sleeping TE, I shepherded her through the door. As usual, I would have to guess.

“So what’s wrong?”

She dropped to the sofa with a weary sigh.

“Can you put the baby in her crib? Where’s MT?”

“She’s with Calista getting milk.”

She closed her eyes as I lifted up baby TE and took her to the bedroom. Back in the living room, I tried again:

“Is it your mother?”

She had told me before leaving that her mother was in the hospital. After an interval of tisks, she said softly:

“She’s very sick, you should see her.”

“What’s the problem? What are the doctors saying?”

“It doesn’t matter what the doctors say. I can’t explain. We’ve got to talk.”

"What's the problem?"

"I'll tell you later."

Without her saying—I knew she was referring to the *lobola* [bride price] debt to her father. He had no doubt reminded her that ill luck that was sure to befall a family whose traditional obligations were not fully met... It was then my turn to sigh.

February 22

The letter which arrived this morning bore the letterhead of the Department of English from the university of my natal province. Comrade Hund, who picked it up from the office pigeonhole, handed it to me across the staff room table with a cackle ("Take it before the onslaught of other prying eyes!")

I waited until I was at my desk at home before opening it. The single page, also bearing the university letterhead, was filled with the familiar scrawl of the hand of the hoary professor *emeritus* and once 'creative writing' mentor, Dr. Ted C. While the letter I send him last month (describing my current situation) was not meant to elicit practical advice, his response was unsettling:

'Yes, if you want to teach here, you will certainly need better qualifications than you have now... The way teachers are victimized here—the most qualified and the best ones are not even hired. If you sometimes feel discrimination in Africa—despite having a black wife and children born there—I'm not surprised. But bear in mind that the same silly rules operate here... I really don't know what advice to give you...'

It was an utter contrast from his usual gentle encouragements. His tone was of irritation—almost as if to say: 'Stop whining—you made the bed—now you lie in it!'

Staring into space with MT ducking her head into my lap, I stung with embarrassment.

As harsh as it was—I took it like a mouthful of castor oil. If indeed, I (inadvertently) came across as whiny—then I deserved a dose of reality and a severe shaking... Good old Ted!

Hugging MT tight, I wondered again, whether I ought to go back alone in August. To be fair to T. and the kids—maybe I should not send for them until I find a job. Isn't that a common approach to immigration?

Meanwhile, T. has herself recently hinted at her preference for that option. Apparently, she needs to work until the end of December to be granted "permanent employment" in the Ministry of Education. That would at least give us a fallback position to support the children even if I should fail to find work in my wintry native land...

February 24

Dreams of escaping Nebraska:



Anticipating the pleasure of rain-lulled sleep (showers continuing through the day), I lay waiting for T. while she prowled the bedroom with the tea towel, slapping mosquitoes.

“OK, that’s enough,” I said gruffly. “Can you please turn out the light?”

“What do you care? Didn’t you say they don’t suck your blood? It’s too precious for them?”

“Where did you get that crazy idea?”

As she continued snapping the towel, I pulled the sheet over my head.

In the semi-dark, there suddenly wavered up an image of a girl I met in the bar car of the Pacific Starlight Express snaking north from Sacramento, California, *circa* May 1975. She had dark hair and brown eyes. Although from Nebraska, she had been staying with a brother in Oxnard, California, and was travelling north to visit another brother in Oregon... She was only 18—just a few months out of high school. Naïve and sweet.

As we shuddered north through the dark, we sat across a lurching table, talking. When I asked of her favourite memory of growing up, she spoke of floating on an inner tube in the Platte River near Kearny, Nebraska... I then told her of my boyhood joy of swimming in the Chiputneticook lakes on the international boundary between New Brunswick and Maine. I dug my map out of my knapsack and showed her just how far apart were our origins.

By the middle of the night, we were holding hands. When she stepped off the train in Klamath Falls, Oregon, I kissed her cheek. It was as pure as that...

Had we not exchanged addresses, that snow globe memory would have remained intact. But over the next year, a few letters were exchanged. Hers were filled with unhappiness about an uncertain future...

I called her number one night in the fall of ’76 when I was first preparing to leave Canada to teach in Africa. She was back in Nebraska, working in an old folks’ home. I told her of my plans.

“So where does that leave me?” she said bitterly.

I was taken aback. I could not understand how she could have come to believe I had been leading her on. So our little exchange ended forever...

13 years later, I wonder about her fate. Perhaps she did become a nurse, as she'd hoped to do. Perhaps she met a solid Nebraska lad and is now raising a corn-fed midwestern family...

Still, I think of a teenage girl, floating on an inner tube down the North Platte River—dreaming of a wider world...

Pulling the sheet off my face, I blinked in the glaring light under which my dear wife still swiped the towel at phantom mosquitoes.

March 2

Hamlet in the British Council:



With the motorcycles buzzing down Cameron Avenue outside the doors of the British Council screening room and the babbling of our infant in T.'s arms, I could not give undivided attention to the film of *Hamlet*.

I was glad to see that the Form VI students were engaged. Especially charming was the reaction of the girls to the 'get thee to a nunnery' scene. In reading the same scene in class—they could not have imagined Hamlet, in tight leotards, grabbing a distraught Ophelia by the crotch. They clicked their tongues in shock...

As for their Literature teacher, his attention drifted in and out of mundane concerns:

'...Will the film finish in time for me to make it through the TM supermarket doors before closing time? Did T. remember to bring an extra nappy to change the baby before we get in the car? How long should we wait for Mrs. Zindoga for the lift she's expecting back to the school?'

In the few moments when the neck-hairs did tingle (such as graveyard scene wherein Hamlet held Yorick's skull aloft) and the mind nudged into the sublime: he offered a silent apology to the spirit of the Bard Himself:

'Half a millennium into the future we are still far more of beast than of angel: still largely driven by the urgings of stomach and loins—regretting, waiting, hoping—scarcely daring to embrace the here and now...'

March 6

Guilty as charged:

Such a bundle of frayed nerves I am becoming! In the hardware aisle of TM supermarket in Avondale when the front of the shopping cart pushed from behind me by T. accidentally caught my heel, I yowled:

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

T. stopped up with her embarrassed smile—the same smile as on that bleak day a year ago after I had hurled an obscene epithet through the open car window as she pulled up from a drivers’ lesson 20 minutes late. That burst of impatience nearly cost our marriage.

Today, the toll to be exacted began with 10 minutes of ominous silence in the parking lot. Only after Comrade Hund scurried to the video shop, did she speak:

“I won’t put up with this again,” she warned, “This is the last time you’ll *ever* embarrass me in public. This is final.”

The fact that today’s offense was just as grave as that of a year ago—but did result in the usual removal of the wedding ring—left me all the more guilty and rattled. Surely, the other shoe is yet to drop!



March 8

‘We regret to inform that a visa officer is unlikely to visit Harare in the near future. Should you and your wife wish to arrange for an interview in Pretoria...’

Sheltering from the downpour under the school office eaves, I stared at the ragged edge of the yellow envelope from the Canadian consulate in Harare.

When T. came back from her classes at 4:00 PM, I showed her the rain-spattered letter:

“I hate to have to go to South Africa—but it looks like that may be our only option. Getting a visa for there with a Zimbabwe passport will probably take a long time,” I said. “We’d better apply now at the South African trade office.”

She shook her head. “Not me.”

“What do you mean? If we have to go to Pretoria for your immigration visa, we have no choice!”

“I have a choice.”

" You know we've got to leave here in August— that's when my contrast ends. You need your documents. The girls already have Canadian citizenship. Obviously, you're not staying behind."

"If I have to, I will."

"T., please. We are a family. We have to go together."

"I decided—I don't want to go. You've embarrassed me too many times—I've had enough."

Craning around, she gawked out the torn curtain toward the bank of black clouds scudding down from the north. "The rains are late this year," she murmured. "Very late."



At 7:30 PM, with the rain still pattering in the dark, I hunched back on the bed with MT on my lap and little TE blinking wide-eyed beside her. To the delight of MT, I drew forth my harmonica and played '*Oh Susanna*' and then '*Dark as a Dungeon*'. In a shivering voice, I sang out a few verses of the last number:

*'I hope when I'm gone and the ages do roll
That my body will blacken and turn into coal.
And then I'll look down from my heavenly home
And pity the miners, a diggin' my bones...'*

"More daddy— play again, daddy!" MT pushed her head into my lap.

'*Mark this well,*' I knocked my blues harp against my knee, '*it gets no sweeter than this!*'

March 10

Whispers in the dark:

"I'm not going to Canada unless you have a job," said T. after lights out.

"You will have to be a little patient." I whispered. "It'll probably take me a few weeks to find one. That's why we need to save so we can get through those first weeks until we have money coming in."

Expecting a repetition of the threat—I was surprised when she changed the subject:

"You promised to respect my culture. You signed a paper. Now you refuse to pay my father *lobola*."

“Com’on, T. it’s not like your father got nothing. He got a big down payment. And think of all those new clothes we bought him! Look, now we have to think of our girls, first. We’ll need every penny we can save to get resettled. Your father can wait.”

“I can see this could lead to our separation,” she hoarsely whispered. “Not just separation – but divorce.”

I rolled over with a sigh. At least she spoke in the conditional mood—and not the definite. That is progress!



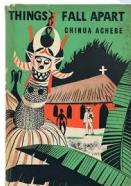
Ad. Note:

Still, mulling over how to answer the letter from Aussie Steve C., received a few days ago. He and his Shona wife, Judy, returned to Adelaide last year. He seems to be still in the throes of culture shock.

“...We made a mistake in coming here,’ he wrote, ‘It is very difficult to make ends meet. Please send me an address to apply for Zimbabwe immigration.’

That plea does this auger well for our prospects, just 5 months hence...

March 16



While reading the letter from old Igbo friend, C.I., a few times I had to look away and take deep breaths... We have kept in touch periodically since teaching together in a boys' secondary school in the Hausa north of Nigeria. In his letters over the last decade, he has described his many tribulations: losing his job as a journalist for the Imo State Broadcasting due to cutbacks and struggling at various petty trading schemes...

In this latest letter over 4 double-sided pages, he despaired of the challenges of providing for a young wife and newborn son: *‘the boy didn’t want to come out. He started crawling back trying to choke the mother. They had to operate.’* Yet with his new dependents along with children from his first (failed) marriage, he finds himself jobless: *‘I just don’t know how I can afford to buy milk for the poor mother and little boy!’*

In responding to the apprehensions I had expressed in my last letter, he warned: *‘Make sure you have a job before you go to Canada.’* He even invoked Chukwu [the Igbo Yahweh]: *“For God’s sakes, don’t move without one!”* He ended on a note of desperation: *‘If life continues as desperate as this, I don’t think I will last much longer.’*

If only I could offer him financial help! As useless as mere sympathy may be, I will write back immediately with whatever encouragement I can offer.

At the same time, his letter left me chastened. My prospects in Canada even in winter, surely cannot be as bleak as those of my dear old comrade in Nigeria... There but for the grace of *Chukwu!*

March 19

A blood-brotherhood:



I dragged myself through the flu-woozy day flipping through magazines when I could have been writing job enquiry letters. In browsing through a recent '*Time*', borrowed from Herr Bamburger, I came across an article on the latest HIV research. In both relief and in apprehension, I picked up the following:

The transmission of the HIV virus is much more likely through blood than through other bodily fluids. Surprisingly, its transmission to a marriage partner is much less likely than previously supposed. In one study of an HIV-positive group, a receptive partner in monogamous sex with an infected partner was not infected even after hundreds of sexual contacts over several years...

Other research described in the article indicates that HIV infection rates rise sharply as the retrovirus moves from the latency stage to "full blown AIDS." That progression can take as long as 7 to 10 years...

That detail jolted forth a memory of a strange episode in Harare, about 6 years ago:

It was an attractive nurse on home leave from Switzerland with whom I stuck up a beery conversation one Friday evening in the Sportsman's Bar of the Jameson hotel. I mostly listened as she talked about growing up in her close-knit 'coloured' community of Arcadia in then Salisbury, Rhodesia. She told me about how she and her friends were "blood-brothers". In consecration of mutual loyalty, they would nick themselves and press bleeding fingers—even bleeding wrists—together.

"Did you have any white blood-brothers?" I asked.

"The Europeans were different, back then," she said, quietly looking around at a table of Rhoddies. "They didn't mix at all."

"I would have been glad to be your blood brother," I smiled.

"Would you really like to be?" She said, probably thinking she was calling a bluff. "It's simple. We could do it right now."

I jauntily nodded.

She dug in her purse for a safety pin. I held out my thumb. Before the bepuzzlement of patrons on the surrounding stools, she deftly pricked first my thumb, and then her own. When the blood welled up, we pressed thumbs together...

“It’s done,” she said.

At the end of a blurry night of barhopping, I accompanied her to the empty apartment of her friend—who had gone home from the last bar with an expat in a Mercedes. Loyal to her boyfriend in Switzerland, she slept on the sofa, wearing his pajamas. I certainly would have preferred to have been treated as a more intimate ‘friend’—but maintained blood-brother loyalty. I did not press carnal inclinations and slept fully clothed on the floor beside...

I never saw her again. I suppose she went back to Switzerland—perhaps marrying the boyfriend there....

Of course, at the time when we innocently mingled a few drops of our blood, we did not imagine that a viral malevolence, soon to ravage Africa, was just beginning to spread... Is it possible that the blood-brother ritual had been as risky as a more intimate exchange of bodily fluids? Still, any risk taken in ignorance on that Friday night in the Jameson Hotel in early '82, could hardly have been a shadow of that incurred in Mombasa, 2 years later...

Spontaneously, I pressed fingers to jaw to feel the lymph nodes. Even with the latest bout of flu they are mercifully unswollen...

April 2

In procrastinating both the marking of 4 piles of essays and the revision of the letter to Dr. J.W. of CARE Canada, I succumbed to a few chapters of ‘*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*’... My dog-eared copy evidences the extent to which that dark chronicle has oddly provided ‘comfort reading’ over the last few years...

It was late afternoon before I tackled the letter to Dr. J.W. With the chastising letter of Prof. Ted C. in mind, I carefully avoided complaining or wheedling. Only by 8:00 PM was the draft ready for typing up. Whether or not the appeal for advice struck the right tone — I strained for nearly 3 hours to produce that dry little turd....

April 6

Accidental Rhodesian?

After making sure the Form Form students got on the bus departing back to Chibero from the British Council film screening (this time of ‘*Julius Caesar*’), T. and I stopped off at Marimba OK supermarket. While T. waited in the car, I ran in to pick up a few items.

Amid the aisles, I was surprised to see colleague and Department Head, Mr. Zindoga, who had also driven in his own car to the British council screening.

Moment later, we found ourselves together again in the cash register queue. Almost forgetting that T. had asked for a packet of milk, I turned back to my fellow English teacher and made what I assumed a friendly request:

"Mr. Zindoga, do you mind just holding this basket for me when I run back and grab something?"

"Um?"

Although he looked a little stunned, I slipped the handle into his free hand.

Seconds later, I stepped back in the queue and grabbed back the basket.

"Cheers," I nodded.

He rolled his eyes and looked away.

As the cashier touched her buttons, I looked back.

"Thanks again," I said.

"Uhuh," he pursed his lips...

Only then did I catch the whiff of resentment. Did he think that just by being a supermarket in the former white enclave of Avondale—I would (however unconsciously) be inclined to treat him as tote boy for the *baas*? A *mrungu* whom he outranks in the workplace—regressing to typical Rhodesian behaviour? Infuriating!

At that same moment, I remembered the anecdote that Zindoga had himself once related over a beer:

He said as a young boy, walking along the highway near his rural home in Mashonaland East, he and his friends came across a car rolled over in the ditch. A bloodied white man was sitting dazed on the side of the road. Cries could be heard from inside the overturned car. The boys ran forward to offer help. The injured man, screaming in Afrikaans, waved them away...

"That Boer, Zindoga had tsked, "He wouldn't accept help from an African even though his life depended on it!"

Grabbing the grocery bag, I turned again, smiling. " See you back at the school."

"Yep, Mr. T.." Zindoga glanced at his watch.



April 8

Mr. Limo, clutched in emphasis the staffroom table this morning as he delivered his Jeremiad:

“There is one of us in this very room— one of us— who allowed himself to be tempted by a female student.”

Apparently, the father of a Form Three girl, in discovering that his daughter is pregnant, has accused the school of negligence.

“ This is a very serious matter, which can undermine our best efforts here. It can undermine the reputation of the school in the eyes of the Ministry. It is threatening to become a legal case...”

In his gravest timbre, he concluded: “We are not conducting a witch hunt here. But I believe that in the past – I have dealt with similar matters with soft gloves. Yes, I was too lenient. This time I intend to deal harshly.”

Though the speech, the trapped fish—a recent University of Zimbabwe graduate— jerked his legs beneath the table. Eyes downcast, he pulled at the back of his white-collar.

Meanwhile, other younger male teachers, Ngwenya and Kandima, along with the elders like Zindoga and the brooding Deputy Head, Banda, stared stonily at the scapegoat. Whether or not they had ever themselves fallen victim to what Mr. Limo called “teachers’ disease”—their expressions revealed nothing.

April 11

End of the rainbow:

While little MT watched her mother working in the garden, I paced around the backyard watching the storm clouds. Near the grass fence, I heard voices in the Bamberger’s backyard. Stepping a little closer I could make out the voices of Miss W., the middle-aged Methodist missionary, and Miss R., the young British biology teacher. So, T. and I weren’t invited. Who cares?

Resisting the temptation to press ear to fence, I sauntered back to the garden where T., barefooted, was turning the brown earth with her hoe... Suddenly it struck how deeply she is rooted in this soil. Yet in just 4 months— she will be torn away from it. What a profound sacrifice I am asking of her. Yet she seems willing to make it. Could any man be more blessed with such a beautiful wife and children?

With the fluttering of tenderness, I swooped up MT in the crook of my arm. I trundled her round to the front of the house to check for any clearing in the sky to the west. Just then, a rainbow glowed softly in the deepening dusk.

Look, honey!” I held up and pointed her little arm. “It’s a rainbow.”

“Rainbow,” she repeated.

Do you know what's at the bottom of that rainbow?"

"Tell me daddy," she said.

"There are fairies dancing round a pot of gold."

At that moment, I almost believed there were...



May 2

With T. and the girls at the family farm in Topola, I spent much of the day squatting on the living room floor with scissors and tape. I wrapped 3 20 kg cardboard boxes to be posted to old buddy, J.L.'s address in Maple Ridge, BC. Hopefully, we will find it in his garage upon our arrival in late August.

Part of the shipment includes old notebooks. As in the mailing before the Tanzania departure, I leafed through pages worrying about the risk of them being lost in transit. At the same time, I recognized that as long as those scrawlings remain unworked, this 'precious' raw material, has no more value than the reams of paper already burned.



Meanwhile through the day, the silence in the house was eerie. At one point I went into the girl's bedroom where I swear I heard MT sucking her thumb.

After just 2 days without hearing their girls' squeals and 2 nights of an empty bed, the absence of my family was like the ache of the phantom limb....

May 3

From the office phone, I called the farm line, hardly expecting to get through. To my relief, T. answered. Through the crackle it was hard to hear.

"How are you and the girls? Can you speak up?"

"We almost didn't make it here," she said. "The tire on the bus burst. It was like a bomb. The whole side of the bus burst open right under where we were sitting. My heart stopped. I should have driven here!"

"Omigod. I'm sorry, honey. Are the girls OK?"

Her voice faded in loudening crackles before the line went dead.

I put down my blue \$2 bill on the desk of Emma the secretary, who had been pretending not to listen.

Chest constricted with horror, I walked back to the house. Yes, I should have let T. drive instead of asking her to take the bus. My family could have been wiped out in a single stroke! Even with all his favours, I should not have put my family at risk so that Hund could borrow the car for the meeting of his German organization in Harare.



Back in the empty house, heart still palpitating, I checked the address on the manila absently picked up from the office pigeonhole. It was the long-awaited reply from Dr. J.W., the Director of CARE Canada!

Too queasy to open it, I put it aside. Only at 7:00 PM under the sleeping bag by the flickering TV did I teeth it open. Dr. J.W. afforded me 3 longish paragraphs—the key sentence of which was:

'You're right that it is very difficult to move from teaching to the development area—difficult but not impossible.'

I looked aside for a moment. The tone was a little formal, but the message was measured and fair. Finding work in the field of international development was *not* impossible... Maybe there *is* a real shot for a career change!

May 4

I sorted through the rat's nest of photos and slides in the living room cabinet drawer this morning. Most were of T. and kids, but there were several from my latter-bachelor days—including a black-and-white photo of Mariam K., from Mbale, Uganda. I turned it over and read the photo-shop stamp: Mombasa, May 1984.

By the time, she sent it to me in Zimbabwe, I had abandoned any notion of seeing her again. I has begun dating T. with whom I would soon be engaged.

Just as when the photo first spilled out of the envelope in mid-1984, I was saddened by her somber expression. Without make-up, her hair unbraided and in baggy dress she seemed to be trying to convey that she was no longer plying the tourist trade...

4 years later, I wonder just how likely it was that she got away from Mombasa. If she hadn't, she would no longer be dressing in blue jeans and drinking on the bar terrace of the Castle Hotel. If she'd survived at all, she would now be one of the wraiths calling out from the alleys after dark.

Yet maybe the gods have been merciful... Maybe she's back in Uganda working in her own tuck shop or hoeing some patch of green hillside in her own coffee *shamba*. Yet she would likely be the last to expect mercy...

Should I throw the photo away? With a sigh, I stuffed it in a manilla marked: 'travel: 1980-1984.



May 5th

Rubbing off the moisture on the mouthpiece of the office telephone, I dialed the Harare number of my Canadian NGO. Irene, the new Field Staff Officer, answered on the first ring.

"Any more information on the date of a possible immigration interview in Botswana?" I asked.

A few weeks ago, she had assured that a trip to Pretoria for T.'s immigration interview (with the attendant degradation of separate accommodation) would not be necessary. With a few others affiliated with the organization also waiting for Canadian immigration interviews, she suggested that an official from the regional embassy in Pretoria could go to the nearer capital of Gaborone, Botswana, to do the interviews.

"Nothing yet," she said, "It's up to you to set the date. Have you written the embassy back yet?"

"Not yet. What about the van?" She had also earlier suggested that a van might be collectively hired to make the trip.

"F!" Her exclamation was so loud that I recoiled from the receiver. "Did I not make myself clear on this? I said we *might* help you get as far as Francistown. Whether we can arrange transportation there by van depends on the date and the logistics."

"Of course. I am not depending on that. We can go to Gabarone by bus if we need to. I will send a letter to the Canadian embassy suggesting a date we're available. I'd like to do it before the end of June. Before the end of term when things will be so hectic."

"F!!"

Again, I jolted in her exclamation.

"F., you can't forget you have contractual obligations to the Ministry of Education. Your teaching takes precedence over this private matter. You can't miss school for things like this."

"Of course, Irene," I clenched teeth. "By the way, I haven't missed a single day of school in the last 2 years."

"Unhuh."

"Anyway, I'll send the letter tomorrow. I'll ask them to suggest a date. I still don't understand why they can't do the interview in Harare."

"O, it's some kind of diplomatic kerfuffle between Harare and Pretoria. You could still arrange for the interview in Pretoria, of course."

"O yes, that *could* be an option all right." I barely hid my sarcasm. "I'll send you a copy of my letter."

In hanging up, I pushed the 50-cent coin across the desk to Emma and smiled woodenly. The arch of her eyebrows suggested even more concentrated eavesdropping than usual...

May 13th

As much as I dread the icy cold plunge in August, I feel there is no choice but to dive... This morning I informed Mr. Limo that I will not be extending my contract beyond August.

I gave him my scripted (job prospects in Canada— like the weather—more favourable in September than December) and promised that I would not leave the Form Six literature class in the lurch. I assured him that I would teach extra classes to cover the curriculum. I did not tell him that even my Canadian NGO prefer that contracts which end in August are extended to the end of the school year in December.

The principal listened stonily.

"Just write all that in a letter addressed to me," he said icily, "with a copy c/ced to the Ministry."

Sitting there glumly, I was reminded that when I transferred to his school, he had assumed that he was getting a long-term teacher—a Canadian with a Zimbabwean wife and children who was thinking of permanent residency... However different our backgrounds—we genuinely liked one another.

In those few minutes before his desk, I could scarcely look him in the eye. I could not hide the feeling of betrayal...



May 15

The visit with fellow Canadian, J.S., was initiated by my phone call last week upon noting in a CUSO newsletter that he was now working in the Harare office. In meeting the project manager with whom I'd corresponded in 1979 (in preparing for my Tanzania CUSO posting), I hoped to ask about job possibilities in the Ottawa NGO world.

When T. and I, along with the girls, showed up at J.S.'s Avondale residence on Sunday afternoon, he was hosting another visitor: a visiting professor of political science at the University of Zimbabwe. From the corner of his living room, I gathered that the retired Professor *Emeritus* had also been a former teacher of J.S. at the University of Toronto.

Despite having been invited to "drop by", we felt like intruders. Instead of having the chance to ask my questions, I sat awkwardly on the living room carpet with MT on my knee trying to be unobtrusive. JS asked a few patronizing questions to T. while largely ignoring my presence...

Still, we gamely offered to drive the professor back to his hotel. Friendlier in the front seat than he had been back on JS's sofa, the professor asked:

"So do you plan to get back into teaching when you get back in Canada?"

"Actually, I was considering a change of career," I ventured from the rear seat. "At least I'd like to look into some options."

"I can see with the family it won't be easy to change your career," smiled the professor.

"I have no illusions about that. You know if there was any future for my children in Zimbabwe, I would stay here. I like teaching Zimbabwean students. They are so keen to learn. It's usually not that way in high schools in Canada."

"You are so right," said the Professor, "I've been impressed by the intelligence and commitment to progressive causes of my undergraduate students. With them it's like the 1960s again!"

"So true..."

Hunched in the backseat of the car with my kids, I wondered just how I had come across back in JS's living room. Even if I hadn't a baby on my knees, neither the professor nor the project would likely have taken me as an equal. Yet it hasn't been so long ago that I would have breezily chipped in (while being privately amused) on the name-dropping chatter... Wither self-confidence when it has never been more in need?

May 21

We were watching the ZBC TV news last evening, when from her blanket in front of the fireplace, T. tossed a bomb.

"I'm going to ask Mr. Mudishwa for a house to live in."

Never before had she issued a threat in such a matter-of-fact tone. I was horrified.

"T.?"

"I'm going to ask my principal for my own house. I thought about this for a long time. Every time my relatives visit, you ask when they're leaving."

"T., that's just not true. You—"

"I want my own house. I want a place where my own family can come and visit me whenever they want. You are rude to my relatives. They hate to visit me because you make them feel so unwelcome."

"T., come on, be fair. That's just not true. R. spent more than 2 months here last year."

"You were rude to all my sisters. That's why they don't visit here anymore."

"Com'on!"

"And then when K. came— you asked him when he was leaving."

"That's bullshit. Your brother had a good time here."

"Look, Mr. Man, I've put up with you for 4 years. That's no joke. I've had enough."

"Please T., get serious. We've going back to Canada in August. I'm applying for your immigration."

"I *am* serious. I'm getting my own house. Not putting up with any more of this bullshit."

Blowing out a hot breath, I turned attention back to ZBC TV news anchor, Joe Madimba. In his deadpan voice, Comrade Joe cited the casualty count in the siege of the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar.



May 24

To my immense relief, T.'s mood-cycle seems to have swung back. A few shards of glass remain under the bamboo mat where she sat this afternoon getting her hair done. Yet no mention was made of the water glass hurled against the fireplace last night.

As one of the Form Four girls (from her home area) worked her braids deftly from behind, she nattered on happily. She seemed especially excited by the offers received for various household items to be sold before our departure...

Meanwhile, back on her finger was the wedding band she'd taken off a week ago...



Unfortunately, the calm was pierced by a new alarm:

In the letter received from the Canadian High Commission in Pretoria, we were informed that an immigration interview in Gaborone would only be possible on July 25th. That was a week before the end of the school term. No other date was offered.

Given the warning about taking time off school “for personal matters” from Irene, Field Staff Officer of my sponsoring NGO, I can certainly not expect the principal to allow it. How can T. possibly get the immigration visa before a mid-August departure?

“... However, we would still gladly arrange an interview in Pretoria at your earliest convenience.”

In Pretoria? How in hell could we arrange that without having our faces rubbed in apartheid?

Although I resisted ripping up the paper—the came a second jolt of fury. Why had I been gulled for a minute that I would get any help from Irene?

If I’d known the only venue for the interview was Pretoria, we might have arranged a trip during the school break last month with JH, the fellow Canuck mechanics teacher at Harare tech. He has always been friendly. We could have camped out—or even slept in his car—if that were necessary to avoid apartheid hotels.

How often have I vowed not to accept paternalistic ‘help’? Has enough flesh not already been extracted for misguided submissions gone awry? Until T.’s passport is stamped with the Canadian visa, I can expect more nausea, accompanied by thudding of the temples...

May 25

T. and I (with our girls between knees) took tea and friendly advice this afternoon in the well-appointed living room of my wife’s ‘coloured’ cousin, Elvis, and his middle-aged wife, Reena, in Arcadia, Harare.

As we munched Reena’s butterscotch cake, Elvis made a kindly offer:

“I think I should be able to get some time off around the beginning of August,” he said with a shake of his pompadour. “I wouldn’t mind taking a trip down south and taking you people into Pretoria to get your immigration papers for Canada. We wouldn’t need to worry about where to stay. I have friends in Pretoria.”

“That would be wonderful, Elvis,” I said eagerly, “We would share the petrol expenses. We could also claim some articles for you at the border if you want to do some shopping.”

“Right,” said Elvis scratching his chin. “That would work for both of us.”

The momentary relief gave way to tremors of unease. What if Elvis should fail to get his own South African visa in time or otherwise not get the time off he expects? Well-meaning though he is—can we really rely on Elvis’s breezy assurances?

After being burned by Ms. Irene— intuition informed otherwise.

May 26

Of deep Shit:

I bent over the bathtub, where gray water churned by 2 flailing little girls and spilled over to drench the bare concrete floor.

"Easy, easy, girls," I said, thinking of how nicely a cold Castle lager would go at that moment.

I pulled my leg away just as another gray wave of water sloshed over the side of the tub. Was the drain plugged again?

Meanwhile, with Calista off the last 5 days— and T. in bed with the flu— soiled clothing was heaping up in the corner of the bathroom, milk souring on the kitchen counter and filthy dishes piling up in the sink. Then there were the plastic toys scattered throughout the hallway and living room.

"Leave it for Calista!" T. says.

Yet while Calista is supposedly sick herself—much more likely she is 'on strike'— waiting for the response from T. to her request for a raise...

Of course, very soon there will be no Calista ever again. Back in Canada, domestic chores and baby-minding will be entirely in our own hands. While I am working, how will T. handle 2 babes alone in in some stuffy apartment?

"Deep shit," chanted MT splashing her face rhythmically with her green plastic fish, "I'm in deep shit!"

"What's that, honey?" I said, startled.

I knew I was *thinking* those words— but didn't realize I was saying them *out loud!*



May 31

In want of noblesse oblige:

"How much of an increase will we give Calista?" I asked after supper, before turning on the TV.

T. looked down at her teaching plan book on her lap. "We don't have to talk about that now."

"Yeah, this is a good time to talk about it."

"Why should we give her anything extra?" she huffed.

"We have to. She almost quit on us already. I won't have her stewing here that she's underpaid. Look, we are trusting her with our children. We can't have her always feeling resentful. Who knows what she could do?"

"I don't care. Let her be angry."

"T., com'on— we can afford to give her \$20 more a month."

"Maybe \$5. She'll continue to eat at least \$25 worth of food here a month."

"OK, what about \$15 extra? Surely, she's worth that. If she leaves, it will be a big hassle finding someone for just 2 months."

"I don't care. Let her go tomorrow. There are so many unemployed girls around here, eager for work."

With a wave of the hand and a 'harrumph' T. bent forward to rule her plan book page.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen sink, the dirty dishes piled up. Wastewater plashed steadily into the orange bucket beneath the leaky drainpipe.

Still, it occurred that the absence of domestic help for the last couple of months just might be the shock therapy we desperately need...