

Clegg News 1994

December. It is getting hot. In the north the sand blows and covers everything. The polythene bags blow too and every bush and piece of grass has its polythene flowers. Curiously you can't see them in the searing light of the day but at dusk they are there, covering the veldt with flashes of colour all the way to the horizon.

The moving sand uncovers the biscuit tins. Three little toddlers pick one up and carry it home. It is a bit heavy and it needs two of them to carry it. It's a long way home but they were nearly there when it exploded. Like drink cans and polythene, landmines are a feature of African existence. We invented them all in Europe but we didn't quite get round to inventing a way of clearing them up. The third child won't enjoy Christmas much either now because he's blind. Just another African story in 1994.

Eileen met a landmine when she was here. She was at the Anglican Mission at Odibo on the Angolan border for half the year. Odibo is in the middle of the pre-independence war zone which accounts for why many of its buildings are still piles of rubble. Eileen did not meet the landmine personally; it was personally met by a cow that the farmer had let into a razor-wired area round the water tower. In Southern Africa the grass is always greener on the other side of the razor wire and so it is a good place for cows. Good until a landmine blows its leg 18 inches upwards through its body. It lies, chewing its cud as though nothing had happened.

It was good to have Eileen - and her friend Hannah - here this year. Suddenly she

was made to feel useful in the adult world. She was needed by her students, loved by her little ones and, in what to me as observer was the highlight, found herself doing quite extraordinarily good work as a trainer of infant teachers. The horrific reality hit me that she might yet end up as a fifth generation teacher.

The other reality was the fun she had with hosts of other volunteers, climbing in Zimbabwe, bungee jumping of the bridge at Vic Falls (well watching I think, but she doesn't tell me everything). Being shot at by the Swazi police. Losing the use of the brakes in the Kruger National Park (she borrowed the combi 'Just to Victoria Falls Dad'). And that little red flashing light near the mileometer of the combi. 'Mr Clegg, I'm afraid the cheapest repair will be a new engine' the VW man said on the phone.

Eileen has now left here for her Archeology course at Liverpool. (Her grant notification informed her that the net grant payable by Somerset County Council would be £0-00 and that the duration of this payment would be from October 1994 to June 1997.) I've cleared up the last mess and paid the last bill. Her furniture is back here in Windhoek. I now have two microwaves one on top of the other which allows me to process simultaneously rather than sequentially, the old spaghetti and the frozen bolognaise. I've also got all the little cockroaches she and Hannah were breeding in her kitchen cabinet.

When we (E, D, Hannah, me) arrived at Maltahohe police station at 7.30pm on Easter Saturday, the duty officer was away at home. I wandered around the open station and came across a group of prisoners watching a slide

show of Jesus being crucified to redeem us all. All, that is, except Maltahohe prisoners who were subject to a different jurisdiction. The pastor in charge was in full flow and a little less than eager to point us in the direction of the hospital to get Daniel's wound cleaned. Souls, not the flesh, were his concern. He quickly delegated a man in a flowery shirt to do it. Flower shirt was not on sure ground so instead he apologised for the absence at home of the duty officer, and then gesticulated in a general northerly direction. The hospital, however, was not difficult to find. We identified it by its hospital-like appearance and by the 'Entrance Strictly Forbidden' notices in Afrikaans on every gate.

Daniel had a nasty hole in his face. It looked rather like a second mouth round at the side. It had been generated accidentally during a little game of golf in Sossusvlei, a large natural bunker in the middle of the Namib. Maltahohe was the nearest hospital, some 175 km distant and so there we had come. The nurses couldn't stitch it up as it went all the way through into his mouth so they cleaned it, gave him a tetanus jab, and sent us on our way to Windhoek.

This phase of the journey came to an end a little north of Kalkrand with some 180 km still to go when a dog put its head through our radiator, though the dog, for a brief moment, might well have taken a different view of what happened. It was then that we met the Angolan car thieves. They were kindly men whose slurred speech we attributed to an unclear grasp of English. It was only when the tow they offered us was well under way that we realised it had a little more to do with coke and vodka. Using the dotted white line in the middle of the road as a rough guide to the direction of travel, they hauled us at high speed northwards towards the tropic, slowing down now and then to pour out more vodka or cast an empty from the window.

Northwards we sped. The combi-full of Brits in tow would lend a legitimacy to the journey that a Transvaal registered bakkie driven by Angolans up the B1 might not otherwise command. No occasion for demonstrating the legitimacy was, however, needed as it was past six o'clock and the roadblocks had gone home to bed. I soon found that it was possible to exert some control on speed and direction from my end of the tow rope. The bakkie was light and I was heavy and by careful use of brakes and my road position found I could pull the bakkie into the bit of the road between the orange line at the edge and the white one in the middle. The problem was overshoot as the strategy tended to set the bakkie swinging from one side to the other like a ball on an elastic. On through the night we oscillated, past the sign that said 'Tropic of Capricorn', past Rehoboth (with a brief stop there for more coke, vodka and a pee), past the signpost to a place called 'Harmony Centre' which I take to be some place with a vaguely military connection, and eventually to Windhoek. Here we stopped. This was just as well as it allowed Eileen to take a breath. As it was the first breath, apparently, for 170km, she was beginning to turn a dubious colour at the extremities.

At 4am we got Dan to the hospital. They inspected my chequebook and then inspected his wound. X-Rays, they decided, were needed, please return at 8am. By 2pm the following day, Easter Sunday, jaw and wallet had been X-Rayed and Dan was in theatre to tie his jaw back together. It was not quite the end, it was only when the bill came that I realised I'd forgotten to insure him.

Dan has now moved from school to a catering programme at South Devon College. He's heavily into Italian food. This

means we've all been eating Italian and I've been washing up Italian. One memorable masterpiece was soapy spaghetti. It became a little soapy when, during the course of draining, it fell into the sink just as the washing machine started emptying. We calculated it was about second rinse so rather than go hungry we did a selective salvage. These delicacies he cooks for brupper. Brunch is the meal for late risers. Dan rises late in style - one meal a day, brupper.

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Are there any instructions with this? was Rob's long considered response after examining the loaf of German bread over the breakfast camp fire. We were in Botswana, in the bush somewhere near Ghanzi. Windhoek bread has much to be said for it. It goes a long way for a long time. In the absence of machine tools, however, it was not immediately clear how to take advantage of these assets. Take advantage of them we ultimately did, however, but not without generating much heat, which was a useful exercise as camping near Ghanzi in July is a two-sleepingbag exercise.

We, on this trip, were Rose, Rob, Tom, Dan and me. We were heading for the Tsodilo Hills and then back via the animals. The Tsodilo Hills are remote and holy places for all who live there - and who visit. For centuries they were decorated with paintings. We had two days without another soul around looking at them. The solitude of the remote places in Africa is something that cannot be described. With solitude comes silence and comes sparkling air; the sound of silence and the smell of nothing except life is the most profound of all the African experiences, most poignant in the early hours when there is nothing between you and the Megellanic Clouds, our soft sister galaxies that crown the capricorn sky.

Up in the north of Botswana we bought baskets. The people there make beautiful ones from a variety of naturally dyed reeds and palm leaves. When we crossed back into Namibia they had to be sprayed. They pumped up the sprayer and dosed them all liberally with compressed air. When I asked about it they said that it was the rules. They used to have some stuff in a bottle that they put in the sprayer, they explained, but it was finished long ago so they manage without it. They are very strict on veterinary matters at the borders here, a friend who imports computers has great difficulty bringing in mouses with them without clearance certificates properly stamped.

The animals were there, of course. Lots of them. 'Nothing here dad, only a few elephant, move on.' Animal fatigue; on we moved. At Etosha we joined the queue to get out of the camp at 6.30 am. My family are not at their most lovable at 6.30 am. We drove straight for a waterhole some way away where, the ranger told us you often see lion and occasionally leopard. When we got there, there they were, four lions lying around motionless, like the fibreglass cows of Milton Keynes. Four stuffed lions. I got into the back and made breakfast. Daniel got into the commentary box, score rate is <1 per over style, to ensure that we missed nothing. Then it happened. Suddenly, the one on the left raised its head two inches, perhaps even as much as three. The commentators' excitement was unrestrained; action replays from all possible angles. Rose, unimpressed, continued to eat her breakfast; one does not perceive lions on an empty stomach.

Back at the camp the ranger was there again, fending off four well-constructed Italian lady tourists reluctant to pay their bills when all they could see were sprinbok, zebra and giraffe. Where were the real ani mals. 'Kalkheuve!'. I interrupted, 'four lions'. 'Quattro leone!' They leapt into their hired Formula 1 citiGolf. The

ranger picked himself up and thanked us. It became our quattro leone holiday.

Dan was driving the Landrover for the first time when we saw the cheetah. 'Stop' we said. He did. We all picked ourselves up out of the front seats. I suggested that in order that we could manoeuvre easily and quietly Dan and I should swap places. In the process my knee caught the horn. Now when you join a group of people from all over the world with extra long lenses and tripods all looking a a pair of cheetah, blowing your horn is not the activity that immediately comes to mind. Although the cheetah paid little attention to the horn, the unsuspecting group of springbok that they were creeping up on did, however, and moved off quickly. Delighted, I felt, at my prompt action in saving the lives of the springbok, the other people watching waved at me. It felt nice and warm to be appreciated.

We learnt a lot of interesting things about elephants on this holiday. The first was that they are walking compost heaps, and anaerobic ones at that. At one end the raw compost goes in, together with an ample supply of water, and at the other end it all comes out, solid, liquid and gas, and the greatest of these is gas. An elephantine fart is big - really big. But it is quiet, a Rolls Royce of a fart, a potent bass rumble and vast ebullition of pure methane, cubic metres of the stuff, enough to heat a small village. The second thing we (well Dan and Tom mainly) discovered was the immensity of the fully extended pachyderm winkle; prehensile at that; a trunk at each end. The third thing we found out is that Namibia has three-quarter sized elephants, but with full sized feet which spread out at the bottom like the trunks of little Baobab trees. These are desert elephants specially adapted to the dry climate. Tom added smallest elephants to his list of superlatives about Namibia (oldest desert, biggest dunes, oldest plant, etc)

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Tom and Rose were here in Namibia with Rob for the summer holiday. They are both at the same school as last year, Tom at Tavistock School and Rose at her special school in Plymouth. She is speaking much more now but still has great trouble remembering things. Decisions must soon be made about the next phase of her education. These are not easy as there is nowhere that really caters for all her needs. She has started staying in the school hostel for part of the week in preparation for the inevitable move from home when she finishes at her present school.

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I wonder if the reason I have a fundamental need to sit and look at water is that millions of generations ago, my genes, clothed in whatever slimy body they were wearing at the time, climbed out of the water and have been regretting it ever since. I wonder, too, if that actually happened here in Africa. Maybe, however, it is simply that Southern African rivers are different.

The first difference is that we are surprised that they are there at all. Permanent rivers here are a rarity. They have to be fed by headwaters that have rain, collectively, most of the year and there aren't that many of those places around - just the hills around Lesotho which get the summer trade rains and also Cape winter snow, and the hills in Angola which have their heads in the tropical wet region. So in Namibia, there is the Orange from the former which is the county's southern border and the Kunene, the Okavango, the Kwando and the Zambezi which form most of the northern border.

The second difference is that they are untamed - well mostly. Where attempts have been made to tame them they have fought back. The dam on the Kunene at Ruacana collects not only water but also silt and is

slowly filling up. The response of the electricity people is to build a bigger and better dam further down so they can make more and more electricity, enough to power and water a big new port up in the north. The problem is they know they have to do this quickly because sooner or later the army of Scandinavian and American anthropologists will begin to be a nuisance. They have spent the last few decades convincing the Bushmen that being trampled on by every one in sight is not necessarily preordained by a higher authority (with or without a coca-cola bottle). Soon they will discover the Himba.

The Himba are a people who live in the north along the Kunene. In all the guide-books they are called 'proud'. To qualify for this description you have to have three characteristics. Firstly, you must be tall, secondly you must be trampled on by everyone else and thirdly you must wear very few clothes. (The bushmen missed out on the first count). In Africa, proud people need anthropologists. The Himba need anthropologists because the Namibian electricity authority is planning to bury their villages under 100 feet of water.

But back to the untamed rivers. It is very difficult to do much with a river whose flow varies so much during the season. You can't even build along the banks. This is particularly so with rivers that flow slowly. The Okavango, which I spend a lot of time looking at each year, flows down here from Angola, over a little rocky outcrop at the beginning of the Caprivi strip and then wanders lazily into the desert and disappears. It flows so slowly that the floods I look down on in February will not reach the desert, only a few hundred miles away, until July. When it floods it doesn't flow faster, it just gets wider. It flows, not because the course is downhill, but because the other end of it sinks into the sand. So you can't

tame it. If you dam it, it will just give up and flow backwards and find another bit of desert to sink into.

The place where I often stay and view this exquisite river through a haze of mosquito coil smoke, belongs to an Afrikaner called Hallie. Hallie is a middle-ranking local government officer there. To prove it she drives a large Mercedes-Benz, the hallmark of all middle-ranking local government officers here. Hallie has that rare and stunning combination, black hair and blue eyes. She also has mole-rats.

It is often not easy to devine the reason for the existence of many of the species with which we cohabit. Why, for example is the gnu? But the reason for the mole-rat is clear. Like couch grass and ground elder, it was created to keep gardeners humble.

The mole rat is a vegetarian mole. It lives totally underground and has a penchant for carrots. These it consumes from the bottom up, pulling the root down into its dining room as it munches. The gardener is left to sit and watch his carrots visibly ungerowing. They slowly sink back into the ground until only the tips of the leaves are visible. Then the rat moves on to the next one. They cannot be caught; although blind they move rapidly through their huge network of underground tunnels and parry all attempts to dig them up, lure them out, trap them or poison them. Humility is the only refuge for the carrot owner with mole-rats.

Early in the year is time to visit the Okavango. I recall a real pronker of a morning there. After the rains of the previous day and night the grass was moist, the air was cool and fresh. The Okavango reflected the Angolan trees in perfect detail. A little mist rose here and there from the floodwater. A day for pronking.

Alas I don't know how to pronk and if I did I

probably wouldn't find it quite as appropriate as a Springbok does on such a morning. Springboks pronk. To pronk you move vertically into the air apparently without effort about your own height, maintaining your body in a perfect horizontal position and keeping your legs straight. Biologists have never worked out why Springboks do it and other animals do not. This is because to a biologist, there are only five reasons governing all activity in the animal kingdom, sex, food, sex, avoidance of death and sex, and they can't see how any of these can be promoted by pronking, not even reasons 1, 3 and 5 (though it is possible the Springboks know a thing or two that the biologists don't).

To those of us who are not biologists it is pretty obvious why Springboks pronk. They just like pronking. It is also pretty obvious why other animals, kudu or elephant, for example, don't pronk. They just don't like it and indeed they would look pretty stupid if they attempted it. But it doesn't matter if you can't or don't pronk, you can still delight in a cool clear moist morning on the banks of the Okavango.

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There are many things in life, like visiting London, or eating an oyster, or meeting a prime minister, that are marginally worth experiencing once. One such is to listen to a Windhoekier telling a joke; the long wait for the punch line, the sudden horror that comes with the realisation that you missed it, the polite laugh, the quick grab of the beer to give your face something else to do. Windhoekers are justly known for many things, but a sparkling wit is not one of them. Because life in Windhoek is serious. Really serious. And of all facets of life in Windhoek, the most serious, the most intensively planned, the most profoundly experienced, is having fun. In May the Windhoekers have fun.

For in May is held Windhoek Karnival, or Wi-Ka as it is known. The karnival is the centre-piece of the Oktoberfest which for geotemporal reasons happens here in May. Thus the whole procession takes place under a mist of alcohol, most clearly illustrated in the playing by the band.

On the second Saturday, at 11.11am precisely, the climax of months of detailed fun-planning commenced. The blonde carnival prince, in tights, cloak and shades, accompanied by his princess, stepped up onto his carriage and seated himself carefully between a lioness and two leopards (stuffed I understand). He was preceded down Kaiserstrasse (which in English is Independence Avenue) by an impressive expanse of Afro-Teutonic thigh, collectively owned by a troupe of drum majorettes who moved here and there in a manner vaguely related to the march from Aida. This was because the march from Aida was the only music apparently known to bandsmen, small round pink people with moustaches specially imported from Bavaria (the people, not the moustaches).

After the official carriage it was something of a free-for-all with a generally nautical flavour. The SMS Nautilus had a rather neatly put together naked Teutonic blonde mermaid on the bonnet. This was followed by the environment lobby ('Cull more seals, save our fish'), several vehicles going backwards, symbolic of the times, it seems, and an immaculately polished Windhoek Municipality vehicle of the type that sucks unmentionable things from drains. A parade of large Roman ladies and gentlemen followed for reasons I did not clearly grasp. The whole procession ended with a Landrover bearing a large BMW logo (Britishe Motor Werk). A touch frivolous I thought.

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They sat at the back of the room. They were lying back in their seats looking bored. This was probably because they were. And they were hungry and simply wanted to get the whole business over with and get on with life. They were the senior lecturers of the Windhoek Conservatoire and they were auditioning anybody daft enough to want to perform in the 'adult' concert next week. And they'd been at it for three hours solid.

We were the *Camerata Geriatrica Windhoek* and I was the principal oboe d'amore. We were last into the audition room. They had had a bellyful of the less tuneful bits of heavy mid-European composers that to the elite of the Conservatoire embody real quality. We, though they did not know it, were about to offer a calypso, some jazz and some McCartney.

We set up quickly. I stuck the *Camerata Geriatrica Windhoek* signs on the two outer stands. There was not a murmur or a twitch. The grey haired man put his head in his hands and it stayed there for the rest of the performance. Two or three looked up; there was the buxom boss of the operation, a lively Afrikaner. There was the little German who is one of the flautists in the Namibia National Symphony Orchestra, the one who isn't married to the Attorney General, and there was a lady whose eyes were still open and who was sitting up.

We played. I tried the oboe in the jazz, the cor anglais in the calypso and the oboe d'amore in the McCartney. The grey head sunk deeper into the hands; the civilised world was coming to an end and nothing at all could be done about it. The flautist not married to the attorney general showed not a glimmer of a response. But the little lady with the eyes open very discreetly tapped a well-turned foot. We finished to a heavy silence and filed out.

Curiously all three bits were chosen for the 'adult' concert. The 'adult' concert turned out, a little disappointingly, to be merely a concert in which the performers were adults. Direct translations without a full appreciation of idioms are the stuff of notices here, hence the butcher in Outjo - a real backwoods place miles from anywhere - called 'Flesh Paradise', and the list in a NNSO concert programme of recent partners of the nice lady cellist who performed the Haydn Concerto.

I'm no longer in the NNSO. They haven't asked me to play since the day Grieg was 150. I don't blame them really. I just have a tiny suspicion, however, that it may be more to do with the fact that I detected- and asked about - a trace of a Rochdale accent in the conductor specially imported from South Africa. One does not get away with pointing out that the Emperor has no clothes on, not in the Namibian National Symphony Orchestra.

The desert is always different. I've been several times this year. About three hours spectacular driving away is Sossusvlei, a magic place in the desert where a river hits a barrier of dunes and sinks beneath them. It is full of a variety of plants and animals and masses of insects and lizards, all unique to the Namib. The dominant feature are the Camelthorns, tough, big old acacias which give shade and green to contrast with prevailing reds and browns.

At about 4pm I walked away up the dunes to the west and after an hour or so, as the shadows were lengthening and the dunes were turning into a vast sculpture of dark curved ridges and red flanks I came across the Dead Vlei. The underground water must have shifted a thousand or so years ago. For the camelthorns this meant a long slow inevitable death. They suffered. They curled back their immense branches to wrap round their

slowly dehydrating trunks. Now, a millennium or so later there remain only the gruesome contorted skeletons, each on its own pillar of uneroded sand, held in place by the crumbling roots while all around the sand has been blown away by centuries of desert winds. Behind them the shifting curves of the dune ridges, deep red in the evening sun and, just above, the rising moon.

'Bly op die Pad' read the notices. This, of course, is an extreme irritation to the young male Afrikaner. His manhood is manifest in his tyres. The fatness of his tyres is a measure of his virility and it is well known here that potency is greatly enhanced by the word 'Yokohama' in white on the tyre wall. With Yokohama written on your fat tyres how can you just Bly op die Pad. To pull the birds you have to bly like hell all over the place and particularly up a big dune or two, your Yokohamas gouging out of the desert floor a testament to your virility that will endure for centuries. Sadly, some have even managed to Bly as far as the dead pan. I wonder if it a posthumous comfort to those old, benevolent but long dead trees, never to have known fat tyres with the word 'Yokohama' on the side (in white).

I had some difficulty with my new camp bed (bought after a little incident with a scorpion when I slept on the ground). The usual African story; two of one bit and none of another. The usual African solution; string. I made a note not to turn suddenly and went straight to sleep. In the desert, of course, a tent is not necessary as it does not rain. However, it is well known in meteorological circles that the probability of rain at any location at any particular time is linked directly to the number of Brits camping there. The sleeping bag took quite a while to dry out. I'm working on a plan for greening the Sahara and looking for British volunteers complete with thermos flasks, groundsheets and butties.

The rains have been spectacular this year. The desert edge was momentarily yellow, a beautiful yellow flower with an evil tetrahedral thorn-at-each-corner seed, called by the Afrikaners, deviltjies. Then it was momentarily green with a rich grass that attracted the springbok, oryx and desert zebra. Then, equally suddenly the whole desert fringe turned a soft waving silver as the grass ran to seed.

Christmas means wall-to-wall volunteers, mostly American because they mostly are. This is one of the nicest legacies of Eileen's year here, they always need a floor in Windhoek after the end of term, on their way to the airport, and Uncle Andrew's comes free. A more enjoyable bunch of people would be difficult to find; a very special group.

To those who have got as far as here, enjoy the rest of your Christmas.

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