

CHILD'S PLAY AND OTHER OBLIGATIONS

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The memories of my childhood in Nyasaland don't kick in until I was almost three, by which time I had already lived in both the small rural settlement of Mzuzu and the colonial capital of Zomba. I had also experienced a trip back to England - two ocean voyages and the coldest Christmas for two hundred years - none of which I can remember and am aware of only through photographs and family stories.

I am an only child. Many people believe that an only child must be a lonely child, but in my case that was not true; my life was seasoned and

scattered with small playmates and interesting companions, many of whom have become cherished lifelong friends.

First and foremost were the people in the house and garden. When my parents, Doug and Dot, returned from their first leave and that long frozen winter of 1962-63, my father was stationed at the bush station of Ncheu, on the border with Mozambique. The house was a spacious, airy bungalow surrounded by a large garden which was planted with rambling bougainvillea, its tissue-papery blooms ranging from deep regal reds and purples to bridal white; frangipani trees with flowers that looked as if they had been crafted from sugar-icing and magical moon-lilies. The heady mix of their clashing, cloying perfumes infused the air.

To help my mother with her culinary duties was our cook, Douglas, who had previously been with us in Zomba. He met us on our arrival; somehow the talking drums that beat through the heart of colonial administration had got a message to him, so that when we pulled up in our travel-dusty car he was sitting on the khondi steps waiting for us.



I knew Douglas, and I knew he had been missing from my life for some immeasurable expanse of time; released from the confines of the car I ran as fast as my sturdy little legs would carry me and leapt into those outstretched welcoming arms. Douglas. This must be home, then; not the other place everyone called 'home'.

Douglas was a constant in my world, like my parents, and from Ncheu on until we left in 1969, he was always with us, living in the nyumba out at the

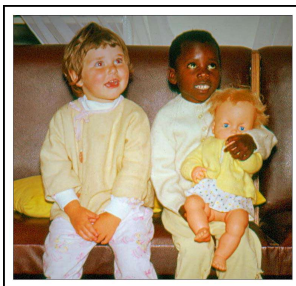
back with whichever of his four wives and several children were in favour at the time. On the occasions when I was left at home in the evening, he was my baby-sitter and I can remember lying in bed in excited anticipation, waiting for my parents to go out, so that I could get up and persuade Douglas to play 'horsey' with me and sneak me a post-bedtime forbidden biscuit. On one such occasion, Doug and Dot went to the pictures - of course, this would not have been in Ncheu, but in Blantyre which boasted The Rainbow Cinema - to see a new film; 'Zulu'. It petrified my mother. Just as all the warriors came over the crest of the hill, brandishing their spears and rattling their shields, my father leant over and whispered conversationally in her ear, "Douglas has got a bit of Zulu in him, you know!" I'm not sure he got to see the end of the film...

In actual fact, Douglas was mostly Yao, with a round face, slanted eyes and a ready smile. Like many of his compatriots in domestic service he spoke several languages - some local and some European which were learned from his previous employers. He had

probably built up quite a repertoire of recipes, too, and regularly cooked for our dinner parties, although I think he may have been slightly frustrated by my mother who liked to do the puddings herself! I hope he was watching over her shoulder even if she wouldn't let him get stuck in. On a daily basis we mostly ate very traditional English fare and so the only dish I now truly associate with Nyasaland is Chambo. (When Tilapia became available in the UK I bought and gently fried some fillets; the flavour immediately transported me back to my childhood. Similarly, I remember my parents' excitement when avocados and mangos appeared in British food stores in the seventies; even though there were never many of them, they were never ripe and they always cost a fortune!)

Ruthie, the house-girl, came into our lives at Ncheu. Most Europeans hired a house-boy, but Ruthie had a five year old daughter, Veronique, and it was decided that she would make a good playmate for me. Ruthie was a hopeless house-girl but she was kept on, regardless. My father would watch her sweeping the floor with not much more than a glance or polishing the furniture as though gently applying an expensive face cream and call out to her, "Come on Ruthie, put a tiger in your tank," but she never did.

Veronique and I played together constantly; the gardener made us a Wendy house out of my old play-pen, putting a thatched roof on it, so we could move it around the garden to give us shade wherever we wanted. There were a sand pit and a paddling pool - this latter was the canvas bath my father had taken out to Africa with him as standard kit;



needless to say, it was never used for that purpose. Through Veronique I learned to share both my toys and my parents' attention and when Dot made me a rag doll or a new dress, Veronique got one too. There are many photographs of us together; playing with the chickens, in pyjamas drinking milk before bed, on the tricycle, on the swing, under the pointsettia tree and at various parties. I'm afraid that as a result of my dominating character a particular benefit my parents had hoped for never

materialised; all Colonial Police officers had to have a command of at least one local language and so Doug dutifully acquired Chinyanja, but I am ashamed to say that while I never learned a single word of Chinyanja from Veronique she soon picked up English from me, as was evident from a conversation Dot overheard. She had bought a packet of what we called 'party biscuits' which were small, round, plain bakes iced in gaudy colours and further decorated with little pictures of toys. I apparently handed Veronique one with a picture of a soldier on it and my mother was astonished when the child rejected it, saying, "Ayi, ayi! Ndikufuna trumpet!"

Veronique was a gentle soul and I was rather inclined to be bossy. My mother would encourage her to stand up for herself, instructing her to push me back or give me a clout now and then, but she wouldn't do it. I don't know if it was just not in her nature or if her own mother had warned her off challenging me, but she did nothing to debunk the myth that I was in charge.

The garden, however, was the domain of Enoch, who was the apple of my three year old eye. He and I engaged in an animated dialogue despite not having a common language, a state of affairs which mattered not to us - possibly Enoch was passing on his advice regarding the production of beans in the bush whilst I was explaining the plot of "Peter Rabbit."

Enoch's face was as ruttled as the Rift Valley from whence he came and his grizzled head was dusted with grey. His hands were gnarled and work-worn, the nails roughly broken short and the knuckles big and bony. He smelled of earth after rain, the muddy odour of wet clay pervaded his hand-me-down clothes. His knees stood proud of his skinny black legs for which his khaki shorts were far too baggy and on his feet he wore boots, with immeasurable pride. They were on the large side for him but, undeterred, he had padded them out with newspapers and old socks and wore them each day to walk to

work. They were clean, too. They shone in the sun and mirrored the smile that lit up Enoch's face. These were not just any boots, they were Police boots and, unfortunately, contributed to his downfall.

Although Enoch was entirely reliable in every other way, he had a vice which took the form of over-indulgence on payday. Every time it rolled around, my father, would take Enoch aside and attempt to impress upon him the folly of his habit, and Enoch, having nodded enthusiastically in agreement, would be led astray once more, spending the next two days in a bemused alcoholic fog from which he would emerge penniless and repentant. To my father's great irritation, Enoch proved himself to be a belligerent and irresponsible drunk and on several occasions had to be arrested by my father himself or one of his police constables. These incidents became the bane of Doug's otherwise idyllic life and were usually referred to, out of Enoch's hearing, with exasperation and wry amusement.

One hooch-sodden night, Enoch went too far and was caught stealing grain from the communal village store. Serious as this was, he might have got away with a cool down in the station cell and a severe reprimand had he not physically resisted arrest and incurred the constable's wrath still further as he remonstrated, "You cannot arrest me. I am wearing Police boots!" Unimpressed, the arresting officer (who was legitimately wearing his own Police boots) escorted the luckless drunk to the station and sent for the Bwana. My father took the matter seriously, as he must, and Enoch was sent to gaol.

The next morning after breakfast I went in search of Enoch as usual. I looked at the outside tap where he would collect water every day, but it was closed off and the watering cans were dry. I wandered down to the vegetable plot where the tomatoes grew but they were still hanging fatly from the vines. Enoch was not sitting beneath the banana tree or sweeping the paths free of the dust of the day before or down by the chicken run. Puzzled, I returned to the house. I expect Enoch's absence was explained to me, but I don't remember that. I was bereft and the days became long; the garden withheld its secrets from me and became a two-dimensional space, flat and empty.

Around this period, Doug received some alarming reports from villagers in the area regarding a couple of lions which had plundered the local kraal, so he collected some men together and they dealt with the problem in the only way possible and fairly soon two corpses were delivered to the house.

My parents decided to keep the hides, but before long queues of the curious formed at the gate hoping to take a look and more; the local witch doctors wanted the teeth, the claws, the tips of the tails, the hearts and livers. A guard was hastily placed to protect the bodies while an urgent request was sent around the area for someone to strip them so that the pelts could be sent away to be treated at a tannery. Ironically it appeared that, although there may be more than one way to skin a cat, there was nobody who was qualified to peel this pair of pussies. No-one, that is, except Enoch, who was still considering the error of his ways in her Majesty's hostelry. Discussions took place. Heads were scratched. Finally, Enoch was brought in to do the job.

We were joyfully reunited as Enoch sat in the shade of tall trees to the side of the house; the white-noise of flies attracted by the rank and bloody spoils was accompanied by intermittent bird calls and overlaid by his rhythmic scraping like a Stone-Age Stig. I spent those days staggering through the now unkempt grass, laden with ersatz-orange Fanta and biscuits for my beloved who toiled in the regulation prison garb of loose white cotton pyjamas patterned with arrows. His silent companion was a faceless, nameless prison guard who sweatily bore the brunt of my indignation from beneath his hat, his torso swathed in a thick, tightly buttoned uniform. I never took the man, who I believed was keeping Enoch from me, so much as a glass of water.

Enoch was eventually released and we resumed our friendship as if he had never been gone, but I somehow understood that nothing would ever be forever again.

My other companion in Ncheu had four legs and a wet nose which was inquisitively thrust into everything it found interesting. My absolute earliest memory is of my excitement on the drive back from the White Fathers' Mission near Dedza, Tessa and I sharing the back seat of the car, that nose sniffing the stream of air rushing through the not-quite-closed window. Kay and Tony Fitzsimmons had heard that the Brothers were unable to support all the stray dogs they had taken in and were looking for people to adopt some of them. The Fitzsimmons had not actually met us at the time, but someone told them that a new Police family had moved into Ncheu and, "they all look very well fed, so they would probably look after a dog quite generously!" What a reputation to precede us! But it was true that we were glad to add Tessa to our household; she was a three year old mutt with the nicest nature who accepted both the discipline my father instilled in her and the attention I lavished on her. It was a Sunday morning ritual of mine to dress her up; never was the expression 'hangdog' more appropriately applied for she clearly detested the exercise, but she bore it with fortitude and good grace. When we left Africa my parents felt it would be unkind to put her through the misery of quarantine and then to expect her to adjust to a climate and lifestyle so different from those she was used to, so Kay and Tony came to her rescue again and lovingly looked after her until the end of her dog-days.

For all its isolation, Ncheu was surprisingly well placed for a social life as people travelling from the north to the south or vice versa would, more often than not, pop in to the Police House for some refreshment or an overnight stay. This meant that my parents not only saw many of the friends they had made during their first tour but also became acquainted with many other colleagues, compatriots and casual visitors to Nyasaland.

On one such occasion my parents were entertaining Gerald and Elizabeth Barry, who had with them their daughter, Julia, who is a year or so older than me. Elizabeth looked me over and enquired as to my linguistic development.

"Is she talking yet?"

"Oh, yes, she's been talking for a year," responded my proud Mamma.

"And does she have a Yorkshire accent?" Elizabeth pressed.

My mother was puzzled. She had clearly never thought about my pronunciation.

"No, I don't think so..." she said.

At that very moment, I was just below the open window playing on my trike, so when something got in my way to prevent me from moving either backwards or forwards, I vented my wrath.

"Ah'm stook!" I howled, thereby answering her query definitively.

While in Ncheu, I began to learn to read. Auntie Audrey, my father's sister, was a nursery teacher and she was able to recommend some suitable publications so that my



mother could get me started on the enterprise as soon as I was ready. Dot began with the books - 'Janet and John' - which she had fetched over from England and I took to it very well, soon learning to associate the shapes of the letters with sounds. My mother, who knew shorthand, utilised a series of pencil marks of her own invention to flag up different peculiarities of the written English language. My parents had always read to me, and I particularly loved the

Beatrix Potter stories which I knew by heart and I think it may have been the combination of my mother's clever little clues and my own ability to remember all the words in those familiar tales that enabled me to read for and by myself very, very quickly.

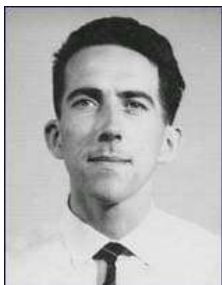
After Ncheu we went back to Zomba, so I lost both Enoch and Veronique from my life but Douglas and Tessa remained with us. As if in compensation, our menagerie expanded to include guinea pigs and rabbits which I played with endlessly, carrying them around in either the big pockets of the pinafores my mother made me or, failing that, stuffed into the front of my matching frilly knickers.

Zomba was a different kettle of fish from Ncheu and there were new playmates and experiences waiting for me there. I was three and a half and was sent to Barty's, as so many of my peers were. I don't think I took to it very well, I was far too used to having everything my own way. I remember clearly an incident during which Ian Hindhough - a perfectly nice little boy - took the blue crayon I wanted to use for my colouring and in an outraged response, I bit him. That afternoon when Dot came to collect me I bore a large set of toothmarks on my arm.

"I'm afraid Vanessa bit one of the other children today and so I bit her back," announced Barty to my horrified mother. "She won't do it again..."

And do you know what? She was right, I didn't! (In adult life I became a teacher and Barty will never know how often I wanted to mete out a bit of her kind of justice on some of my more difficult charges. However, in a time and place where PC no longer just meant Police Constable, I was unable to follow her example.)

After a few months I moved on to another nursery school where my artistic endeavours were greatly encouraged and I came home with sheaves of colourings every day. It was evident that I was learning little else so, disappointed by this, my mother continued to search out suitable books for me to practice my reading with. Unfortunately for Dot, one of the easiest authors to access was Enid Blyton whom she disliked for two reasons; firstly because she felt that Blyton never used a long word when a short word would do - the absolute antithesis of Potter - and secondly because the golliwog in one set of stories had a name which was unacceptable. I did possess some of these books, but in my copies the golly's name was carefully obliterated and my mother neatly printed the name 'Noggle' above the offending blot. I could read them myself, but I much preferred to have them read to me by a dashing young Police officer, Barry Thorne, who would give all



the characters amusing voices and properly bring the books to life. A bachelor at the time, Barry often visited us and it was a great treat for me to clamber onto his lap and listen to another instalment of the adventures of Noddy and his friends.

Our period in Zomba came to an end in 1965, by which time Nyasaland was no more and the new, independent nation of Malawi had taken its place. I have to admit that the shift had little impact on me or my life although it was obviously a cataclysmic change for both the local population and the ex-patriots who were there as representatives of the Crown. We had a trip back to England, which I can remember a little of, and when we returned for what would be our last tour we were initially placed in a house in Sunnyside, Blantyre.

Life was much more serious and structured there. For a start, at almost six years old, I had to go to school and began at St Andrew's where I was placed in a class with other children my own age. It was a bewildering environment to me and I certainly I didn't enjoy those first few months. Although I was a blank page as far as everything else was concerned, I could read every book the teacher offered me with not only ease, but also contempt, as I had become a critical and discerning reader. The teacher tried to re-teach me, using a different methodology which I objected to, and I went home and complained that all the books being made available to me were babyish and boring. I remember my mother having a heated discussion with the teacher about this issue, the consequence of which was that I was allowed to bring my own reading material in from then on and my progress in the subject was largely ignored at school, which suited me.

If I could have spent my entire primary school career sitting by myself in a corner with a stack of story books I would have been perfectly satisfied. Blantyre was bliss in that it offered me more sources of books than anywhere else had done up to that point in my life; there was a library which we visited every week and there was the Times Bookshop where I was taken regularly to choose a book for my burgeoning collection. Doug made me a bookcase, which I still have, the shelves and spaces carefully measured to allow for

the tiny Beatrix Potters, the middle-sized children's classics and the four volumes of African folk tales by Geraldine Elliot and the big heavy tomes that recounted myths and legends of other lands.

Doug also made me a dolls' house, for my seventh birthday, and I loved it more than any other toy or game I had. It was beautifully furnished by Galt in iconic sixties style. That and the little family who lived in it were sent out from England; there were a Grandmother and Grandfather and two children but, sadly, the parents of the children were lost en route. Parcels and post were generally fairly reliable - my father took delivery of an English newspaper every week which his mother-in-law sent him. It would be meticulously wrapped in paper and sellotape and, invariably, he would rip the front page as he dissembled it, cursing under his breath. The news was always months old, but that never mattered. Packages of fabric from the Yorkshire mill towns also made their way to us and my mother created beautiful outfits for herself and me from these.

Another distraction at home were the rabbits. Doug had decided to breed a few for the table and in due course there arrived a very splendid New Zealand White buck, who was destined to live the life of Riley. Snowy, as he was unimaginatively named, had a harem of beautiful Californian does with dark eyes, noses, ears and socks. Very cleverly, my parents told me Snowy was mine and, as there were always new litters of young to be played with, I grew quite sanguine about having my little playmates served up as casseroles, pies or roasts. In fact, I was a vengeful child and any rabbit which bit me was next for the chop.



I was only a mixed infant for a few months, and liked being a junior much better. The teacher was a lady from New Zealand who made learning fun and I can remember practical maths lessons with exciting equipment, being asked to write stories, learning about plants, animals and other countries and painting pictures on large sheets of paper pegged onto easels. We sat on tables of about six children and often worked together. The only aspect of school life which I didn't enjoy was the physical one; I absolutely detested P.E. and games, miserably came last in every race on Sports Day and preferred to spend my playtimes sitting quietly in the shade to running about in the sun. Oddly, I can't remember socialising with any of the children from my class out of school, nor the children I did see socially being at St Andrews, but they must have been because it was the only option for the colonial community.

I believe my parents had the best of intentions when they took advantage of other amenities Blantyre had to offer and enrolled me for various activities which they thought I might enjoy or, more likely, might give me some accomplishments. They must have been terribly disappointed. I loathed only one thing more than the weekly swimming lessons I endured and that was the swimming teacher who was utterly without empathy and insisted that my inability to swim without sinking was all in my mind. I remember the swimming classes and my feeling of failure with absolute clarity. I was equally unsuccessful at the ballet classes, but the memories are misted over, probably because the tutor recognised my limitations and did not try to push me beyond them. I was in the odd production - third tree on the left, or some other equally inconspicuous part - but it clearly wasn't as traumatic an experience as the swimming. Besides, I always has the prettiest ballet dresses, thanks to Dot's deft touch with a sewing machine or needle! I also joined the Brownies, very briefly. Dot, however, served a longer sentence. When I joined, the pack was under threat of closure as they had lost their Tawny Owl, so my mother valiantly stepped into the breach, although it really wasn't her kind of thing. A month later, I was bored and clamoured to leave and she was stuck with it. I was not popular.

One extra curricula activity I enjoyed was riding, and I was taken out to Bvumbwe on a weekly basis. At first I just had a session of an hour but I loved it so much that soon I

was allowed to go to spend the whole Saturday there. My favourite horse was a grey called Glen Mist but I was rather wary of the friskier Whisky and disliked being put on big old Brandy who was a bit of a plodder. The owner had a beautiful palamino called Tio Pepe. I think I was a teenager before I realised that all the horses had been named after the contents of her cocktail cabinet.

At seven I was the subject of a portrait, and I imagine that other children of that era also sat for the young American hippy who was backpacking through Africa with his wife or girlfriend at a time before it was commonplace. They were an extraordinary sight in Central Africa; in fact I was convinced that we were being visited by Jesus because the only man I had ever seen with long hair, a beard and sandals was in my 'Children's Bible in Colour'. His companion asked to borrow the sewing machine to patch her tattered jeans but my mother, who had never seen jeans or even denim before, was worried that the thick fabric would break a needle so offered to do it for her. Dot was rather taken aback when the young woman stripped to her pants on the khondi and passed the trousers over. The artist - his signature identifies him only as P. Grover - sat me beneath some mulberry bushes and offered me a mango. This horrified my mother even more; mangos were too messy to be eaten anywhere but in the bath! The resulting picture, a drawing in charcoal and chalk, is an excellent likeness and I have often wondered what became of those exotic travellers.

As well as school and after school opportunities Blantyre offered treats such as a trip to the Rainbow cinema, where I was always quite literally sick with excitement. There would be a supporting feature before the main film; this was usually Batman and I can remember being quite thrilled by the preposterous plotlines and extraordinary characters. I imagine these short films were episodes of the American TV series. Films I saw included 'Lieutenant Robinson Crusoe,' 'Cinderella,' 'The Gnome Mobile' and 'Mary Poppins' but I was not allowed to go to watch 'The Happiest Millionaire' because I had been given a poor report by the dreaded swimming teacher that week. No wonder I remember her with such vitriol!

For the final year of our lives in Central Africa, we lived in Kanjedza, which was close to Limbe. Although not far from Blantyre, I moved from St Andrews to a new primary school in the locality; my class of about twelve pupils was housed in the library building as not all the classrooms were ready. I remember there being a very tall boy called Peter in the class with me; he was rather a tease. In the end I got fed up with him and invented a pet elephant which impressed him no end and the teasing stopped. My mother was not at all pleased by my imaginative way of dealing with the problem when it all came out; she was very embarrassed when his mother asked her, very seriously, what we fed the elephant on, and I was reprimanded for telling whoppers.

Life in the Colonial services was like a ride on a carousel and people were constantly being moved around the country. Several families came into and out of our social circle through those revolving doors and, inevitably some friendships fell by the wayside and others stood the test of time.

I am now in my mid-fifties and I am both astonished and delighted to find that I still maintain some contact with quite a number of 'children' of Nyasaland. They include all six offspring of Jimmy and Enid Volak; Julia, daughter of Gerald and Elizabeth Barry; Clifford, Sarah, daughter of Ray and Nora Punter, John, son of Mac and Helen Kirkham; Gillian, daughter of Rob and Cathy Bowmaker and the three daughters of Anne and Mike Hall. To my great joy I have also recently reconnected with Jeremy, son of Jerry and Audrey Williams, who now lives in South Africa and has fond memories of the period when he temporarily lived with us in Blantyre. Through my mother, Dot, and her dedicated correspondence with her own longstanding friends from that era, and the very excellent NYPOL Reunions, I regularly receive news of and from many others.

I am sure I am not alone in noticing that those early relationships, when they have endured, can feel more like blood bonds than those developed later with actual family

members. There is a shared history and an immediate understanding between us colonial children; we were brought up in comparable circumstances, the attitudes we were exposed to and which informed our own views of the world were similar and our experiences were much the same. We are kindred spirits and of the same tribe.

