

## CHAPTER ONE

Figures became blurred; faces and waving arms were dissipated and lost. The heat haze and juddering vibrations of the huge ‘iron bird’ as it thundered and raced across the tarmac, swallowed them all.

We had called our last ‘Goodbye everyone’ to friends; with sad and heavy hearts we boarded the plane in a plethora of unreality and aching nostalgia, knowing that now we had to adapt to an entirely new and different way of life. We must learn how to live life in England, the England of now. In this present era times were no longer as we remembered them, the reality of it was daunting, day to day living would be a huge challenge, and no doubt so would the weather! ‘You must find something to occupy your time old pal,’ our doctor friend had said, and we did.

The ‘reality’ was a small launderette cum drycleaners, tucked away in a precinct quite near to our family home in Cheshire, yet again we had to adapt, Jim’s eternal cry was ‘What do I know about launderettes and dry cleaning? Absolutely nothing.’ But he learned quickly, and he learned well.

There were irksome times, particularly on those days when he

chose to work in the garden, planning and planting his vegetable garden at the far end of a large area at the back of the house. Engrossed in his work he hated the ever present – but very necessary – mobile phone. The thing was inclined to ring at any time of the day shattering his peace and quiet concentration; he was in fact a quiet man, noise was not on his agenda! ‘Hello Jim, machine No 3 is refusing to spin,’ one of the ladies in the shop could not get on with the job in hand. If they had a problem their cry was ‘Just call Jim.’

On many occasions, I have looked out over the garden from the bathroom window to see him grit his teeth, lay down his tools and, in sheer frustration, head for the car and the inevitable journey to the shop. But how different and joyful he was having repaired and made good the damn machine which had taken his time. He loved to come home having overcome yet another challenge, another trick met head on. At these times we sat on a bench beneath the old oak tree, it formed a part of the hedge overlooking the field and a herd of grazing Friesian cattle.

We each had a hammock beneath the old tree, sometimes on summer days we lay beneath its canopy, listening to the birds and the buzz of bees. If you swung the hammock sideways you could reach out to grab at a handy row of peas; fresh, good and sweet, there was never a chance to cook them.

It was a good life, not like Africa but a good life nevertheless. Jim could not give me a great span of ocean or the cry of gulls, but he did dig and make three fish ponds, one large, two small, each with a waterfall. A shed was erected by the big pool, a large weeping birch hung over the top end of the water. Alongside the pool we placed a huge Swedish pine table and six matching chairs, they were used by many members of the family and many friends. It was a happy place to be. During the summer my easel, with canvas in its embrace, was also in residence

under the tree. There, attired in a kimono and with a straw hat on my head, I painted pictures – mostly of big game or perhaps flowers. To hand there was often a glass of wine or a good old gin and tonic! From my easel the canvases were taken to the local garden centre, hung and sold. It was a splendid outlet and served us well. There came a spell of card making, they proved very popular but were so fiddly to make, at times I wanted to scream, and they bored the hell out of me. Eventually I gave them up. I carried on with the painting, in fact I still throw my paint filled brushes over canvas to good effect.

Over the years the launderette served us well and enabled us to enjoy many happy holidays, which we might otherwise never have permitted ourselves.

On two occasions we flew back to Africa, driving through South Africa from the Transvaal to the Cape and back again to Johannesburg. On each occasion we met old friends and made new. We motored over the Karoo from north to south, mainly on the N1.

A must was the Big Hole at Kimberley, we looked forward to arriving there as we had visited it in the past and always found it very exciting. Kimberley's Big Hole is supposedly the largest man-made hole in the world – an awesome sight. The original mine was closed down in 1914 after yielding vast quantities of diamonds, the exact number now escapes me. The mine museum tells all, it has a full history. We did study facts but memory fades with the years!

Old style buildings stand still in time, emanating a breath from the past. A grocery shop, a bank and a barber, each as it was so many years ago complete with wax figures, and each doing his allotted task. Everyone was sufficiently life-like to prompt a 'good morning' as you enter and to make you feel a complete

fool as you leave. Uncanny! In a siding alongside stood railway carriages used by Cecil Rhodes; a bit spooky to see the loo and his shaving tackle still in place.

Also in the Northern Cape we called in at the Tswalu Kalahari Reserve, the game was varied and wonderful as ever. The whisky and soda in the evening was made more enjoyable by the spectacle of an exquisite sunset – seen only in the Northern Cape.

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Having said that, I hear a voice calling across the garden; ‘Mum have you seen the sunset? Just go out onto the veranda.’ I went onto the veranda and looked over the field into the western sky. It was a cold and frosty end of winter evening, everything sparkled. In the cold evening air the glow of sunset was weepingly beautiful, quite breathtaking. It hung in the air like a gossamer cloak, from deep blood red on the skyline graduating to crimson, vermillion, dark orange and on to orange with a shimmer of beauty it gradually mingled with the indigo blue of the sky above.

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Breaking our African journey for the night, we halted at the small Afrikaans town of Beaufort West. It could scarcely be described as a town, looking rather like a place dropped from a dizzy height, or a film set carried in by transporter, built in situ and mostly placed in one main street. The main street did have a name (which sadly I am unable to remember) the shops along this avenue sold almost everything – all the essentials of life and much more. A few Dutch style private houses stood spotless and regal amongst hardware stores, a garage, dry cleaners, shops which carried green groceries together with a medley of other what-knots.

Hardly a soul spoke English. The population was almost all Afrikaans. Both sexes were mostly attired in traditional costume and many of the ladies wore bonnets. All around, for as far as the eye could see, heather and cactus covered the otherwise bare land. In the distance a storm was very much in evidence, the harder you looked the more it appeared to encroach, bringing with it a howling wind of hurricane force. No-one seemed unduly alarmed by what was obviously going to be a storm of huge proportions. Our reason for staying here overnight was because it was wild and beautiful and appealed to our sense of adventure.

It was becoming cold. Suddenly Jim said, ‘Hang on love, and popped into the hardware store. He had decided we might need a hot water bottle (not the easiest thing in the world to purchase). There were none in sight and not a word of Afrikaans in Jim’s head but he made it, emerging from the shop with a red rubber hot water bottle inside a brown paper bag tucked beneath his arm, and a huge smile on his face.

We snuggled up and stepped out, the wind blowing in from the side jostled us one into the other, as we made our way to the hotel. Later bathed and spruced up we sat down to what can only be described as an ambrosial meal, accompanied by superb Cape wine. Later coffee was served in a spotlessly clean sitting room which smelt beautifully of polish and tobacco – its walls were almost entirely covered, by enormous Dutch oil paintings.

Browsing through the papers which lay on the side table we found just one in English. In a very short space of time replete and feeling strangely tired, we made our way to the bedroom and a huge four poster bed. Off went our clothes, we contented ourselves by snuggling down into a soft mattress, covered by a big feather eiderdown – it can be cold on the Karoo. Our ears caught the sound of the storm raging outside; cosy and warm our contentment was almost indecent! We slept.

The cool morning air was tantalizingly fresh and rain-washed, the sky clear and bright. Over the Karoo tiny flowers which had lain dormant through the dry were showing their heads, painting the wilderness with a wash of colour. With the rain came millions of flowers which covered this vast swathe of land, given water they appeared almost overnight.

The next day held a dreamlike quality. ‘What a breakfast this is,’ I remarked to Jim. Everything was laid out on the huge oak table; cereals, fruits of every description, hams, cheeses, huge dishes of butter, marmalades, jam and honey. Coffee was served at our table. We were lucky. What a life!

There was still a long way to go on our trip, after taking some time at reception we collected our luggage from the bedroom, gave our thanks to the establishment, threw our bags into the back of our hired car and ourselves into the front seats, with my hand on Jim’s knee we pulled away from this delightful little place. Looking over to the right the clouds were gathering again. Later that day we heard there had been a terrific storm over the Karoo, vehicles had been over-turned and people killed. Such are the vagaries of a wild and wonderful Africa.

On another occasion we followed the beautiful Western coastline known as the Garden Route, along the coast through Knysna, home of the rich, and the Wilderness area to Capetown. We enjoyed the relaxed splendour of the hostelries, savouring on our journey the delights of fresh, delicious, splendidly cooked meats and fish accompanied by wines from the surrounding vineyards served in all of the sumptuous hotels we encountered en route. Food does seem rather high on the agenda, so much talk of food!

We spent nights with Elke and Peter in Graaf Reinet, friends first met during our time in Paraguay; eating well and drinking a fair amount we talked deep into the night.

I had a friend Jose Locke, born of a Welsh mother and a Jewish father, her home built by her late husband was in the district of Somerset West and lay within the shadow of a nearby mountain, the garden was exceptionally beautiful and very peaceful, despite the calls and shrieks of two African Grey parrots who lived a good life standing on a perch near to the entrance porch. Jose held long and amusing conversations with them. Jose's laugh was almost a cackle they could imitate her to perfection.

Jose and I had a desire to eat squid, it became a craving. Jim of course would never dream of eating squid, but he did volunteer to drive us down to a small fish restaurant situated in Hout Bay, an area of extreme beauty. Here we sat at a table overlooking the ocean and ate, with sheer heavenly delight and great relish, what must be the most delicate squid in the world; beautiful and milky, straight from sea to kitchen to plate – ambrosia. Jim ate bass I think, whatever he had it could not compare with our huge helping of squid, lots of lemon and a large glass of cold white wine. Our meal was accompanied by much finger licking and lots of napkins. As I write my cheeks are tingling and my mouth watering at the very thought of it. We liked food – our thoughts were never too far away from the next meal!

On our way back we followed the route to the Fairest Cape of all, Cape Maclear and Cape Point. The cliffs on this southern point of Africa tower 200 meters above the seas and consist of three promontories; The Cape of Good Hope, Cape Maclear and Cape point. Out at sea the waters of the warm Indian Ocean churned and boiled as they mingled with the water of the cold Atlantic. The coast on the Atlantic side was washed by the Benguela current. Eventually after a blissful day we wound our way back, up and down escarpments, around hair pin bends and sheer drops to Jose's home in Somerset West, which was surrounded by vineyards. What more could one want or need?

On one of our tours, Jim and I stopped at ‘Pilgrims Rest’ in the Drakensburg Mountain range. It was founded in 1873 and has a link with gold mining and prospecting pioneers of the last century. It is the most beautiful area of streams waterfalls and crystal pools.

In Pilgrims Progress we happened upon an old cottage, it had two small bedrooms and not a lot else. Here we slept on a rickety old iron bed, the end of each bed sported shiny brass knobs, all of which were bent and distorted. The comfort of these beds had been enjoyed by past pioneers, but not by us. Not a great deal of sleep was had we were wracked by discomfort and haunted by past ghosts. We managed to wile away the night in numerous ways. It was, to say the least, a night of unusual experience!

On shorter breaks we usually motored to Plymouth, boarded the ferry and made ourselves comfortable in a previously booked ‘Commodore’ cabin, which provided us with comfort and privacy until our arrival at the port of Santander.

We spent time in France, Spain and on occasion Portugal. In fact at the end of January or the beginning of February it became our habit to flee the vagaries of the British winter in a bid to uplift our spirits, lighten our hearts and raise our faces to the sun in the Spanish Costas.

From the fishing ports of the far North West, we motored through the foothills of the Pyrenees – our first stop was usually Sanguesa. It was here we picked up wine from the bodega and lovely green virgin olive oil on our way back home. Sanguesa also had the dubious privilege of introducing us to our first bullfight.

On to Pamplona and the bull-running; here we almost always

lost our way. From here we wandered down through the valleys and up through the hills to Monserrat. Up and down over dry, narrow, bumpy, stony, sliding, tortuous, sheer, buttock-clenching, groin-twitching, we-are-going-over-the-edge, roads – travelling in sheer terror. We had never encountered such escarpments even in Africa. Our destination was the far north eastern port of Cadaques. We stayed in a lovely little hotel on a promontory which overlooked the bay. A little way below the hotel was the home of Salvador Dali. A small costal town, Cadaques boasted a fish restaurant on the harbour which served the most scrumptious fish food straight from the sea to plate.

One afternoon Jim had the urge to walk to a tiny nearby store to buy peanuts, in the short time he was away he became caught up in an almighty local storm, it wet him through. Falling through the bedroom door his first words were, ‘It is said that if a man’s balls are wet then he really is saturated.’ He marched over to the bathroom, water dripping from every limb.

‘This will cool your ardour,’ I laughed.

‘I doubt it,’ he said clutching me to his body and soaking me through.

There were times when we motored through France and on to Portugal. Spain was always a joy, we always avoided the tourist towns, but in the Pyrenees in the interior we found the tranquility we preferred. There were more challenges to be met, more excitement and history to explore, we were able to wander at will.

We enjoyed the most exciting holidays and had no concerns for the business back home. In our absence it was cared for by extremely hard working and loyal ladies. We loved to go away but we were always pleased to get home to what had now become,

the norm, the familiar Cheshire in which we had been born and bred, and where we had our roots.

Home was in Somerford, quite near to Holmes Chapel, our children and the many relatives and friends living nearby. It was an attractive place to live, not least because of the close proximity to the haunts of our youth. It enabled us to become steeped in things past and, as wantonly nostalgic spirits, it was a lovely thing to do. We could go out and about in the Cheshire of our teenage years, the area where the family had farmed in the past, or perhaps owned a pub. Nantwich Tarporley, Crewe, Beeston, Bickerton, Oswestry and their surrounding areas. Some family were still farming in the area and we were having a wonderful time celebrating the past, talking of the past and meeting people from the past. It was just what was needed at this stage in our lives. Sadly the roads were not as we remembered them. Most of the little lanes had either disappeared or had been by-passed by motorways, never easy, it reduced us to total confusion. But, after our adventurous life and the long straight roads, from one end of a land to the other, it was time to settle down to normality. To taste a little of what was left of the life we had left behind in England all those years ago. We had to adapt to an England that was changing almost from day to day

It was on the first day of one of our annual holidays, we were driving on the motorway to Plymouth – I seem to remember it was 1998 – when suddenly Jim became unwell, he had been experiencing ‘off days’ for some time. He tried to assure me that it was a mere ‘blip’ and that in no time at all he would be okay, in the light of this we carried on. As a matter of fact we had a wonderful time, it was (as always) a holiday full of love, fun and adventure. We enjoyed the best of good food and splendid wine. Deep down, I still felt very concerned about his health. It was the beginning of what was to be a three year nightmare.

Not long after arriving back home the illness took a strong hold

but we carried on, always thinking, ‘Another hill we have to climb together, eventually, we shall reach the summit and return once again into normality’. This did not happen.

The following year we took our final holiday together. The trauma of that time is indescribable, I shall not go into detail, other than to commend the A.A. who acted so promptly in getting us from our hotel in Spain back to our home in Cheshire, and our son-in-law Peter who kindly flew out to assist me in the nightmare into which we had become embroiled.

We said our last ‘Goodbye, I love you,’ on the evening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2001. I lost my husband, my lover, my companion, and my friend of over 60 years, on the 4<sup>th</sup> February 2001. Where in God’s name did I go from there?

The die is set. At first I lurched from crisis to crisis, going from one pile of legal problems to another. Both my body and my mind decided they had had enough and gave up. For some days bed gave me a little solace, though I could not shake off the feeling that I had descended into the slough of despair, from which I would never arise. What was there left? A life without Jim, which meant there was nothing left. Lying prostrate and numb, my mind wandered backwards and forwards over the last years, months, weeks and days we had together, then back to our full interesting, joyous and eventful past life.

All this I have tried to paint in a picture of words in *Walking Back*, my book of memories, in which I have wrung out the unbearable grief from my ravaged soul in order to divest myself of this nightmare. It was written to enable me to lift one foot in front of the other.

Alone now, in the black of night whilst listening to the owls, I am reminded of the life giving weekends we spent in Wales. Our room was an upgraded barn belonging to a small hotel, The Tyn-

y-Cornel in the Snowdonia National Park. From our bedroom window there was a panoramic view of the lake opposite. How we loved the persistent screech of owls on moonlight nights it seemed so bewitching and hauntingly romantic. Almost always at some point during the night we pulled back the curtains, sat on the edge of the bed and with heads together watched them fly over the lake. A glistening moon shone on back feathers; black shadows reflecting on dark rippling waters disappeared as they glided into a nearby tree. Now, our small intimate tableau can never be repeated. So often in the past we had retreated to this tranquil little bolt hole it had been a place where we found privacy, peace and the solitude which was so essential to our well-being.

Our home is empty now, it 'feels' empty.

'Where are you?' I call out into the darkness of night. 'Where the hell are you Jim?' To be answered only by a thunderous silence.

It was during the dark of night, as I tossed and turned wondering what my next move must be to escape this morass of torment that I suddenly remembered my painting. For most of my life I had put brush to canvas, or paper. The following day slouched and meditating at my office desk; brooding and grieving heavily over the enormity of the present situation, I suddenly found my hand reaching out towards a canvas propped up against the wall, alongside it a box of paints. I looked at the canvas stroked it fondly and wiped off the dust. Was this my answer? Could it be an offer of hope and healing in this dark, bewildering and unknown wilderness, which was to be my future?

Scrambling, almost falling over, I lurched towards a box of old photographs. Hot moist hands fumbled in haste in an effort to look for the picture I had in mind. 'There it is,' I whispered softly, as I tenderly picked it out of the box. It was a picture of the two of us arm in arm, looking out over Mana pools. We were

watching the elephants slaking their thirst in the near distance. The Mana Pools are a part of the Zambezi River on the Zambia/Zimbabwe border, another place we loved and automatically found our way to whenever we could.

‘Can I replicate this, have I the ability to put this picture with all its depth and meaning onto canvas?’

My mouth dried up at the thought my tongue felt like blotting paper.

‘I must try,’ I said to myself quietly. With easel erected on a sudden whim, and canvas at the ready, I prepared the surface for the application of colour. Tubes of selected oil paints, my palette, pots, linseed oil, brushes, palette knives, bits of stick, a jar of spirit and lots of rags were on the table at my side, it was time to go.

Tentatively, slowly but, with deliberation, I squeezed paint onto the palette rolling, turning and mixing it with a palette knife and a large brush. I applied paint to canvas on the area which I had allowed for the sky; sweeping, pushing, blending, wiping, adding touches of other colour to create the mood of the landscape which I knew so well. I felt the whole process of sweeping, jabbing and of twirling paint to a satisfactory and hopefully dramatic end must be, the beginning of what I knew would be a long and tough healing process.

I approached the painting with wild abandon and with more than just an enthusiastic determination to succeed. I needed to project the special feeling of the subject, with all its subtle shadows, shades and nuances. I feel I succeeded in catching the mood and so do other people.

It now hangs on the wall, quite near to my easy chair. Some-

times I find myself looking at it for a long time which always creates a great longing for what has been, and a choking knowledge that it never, can be again. The end results did bring some solace it also made me very twitchy to return to Africa.

Life is like an opera as we move, between one life and another. This way it is not a pastiche of life, but life as it is.