A MEMOIR

RED DUST and *Cicada Songs*

Mary Bomford

"Africa…gave her the privilege
of a second childhood…a time of awe."

—Judith Thurman in the
introduction to *Isak Dinesen's Africa*

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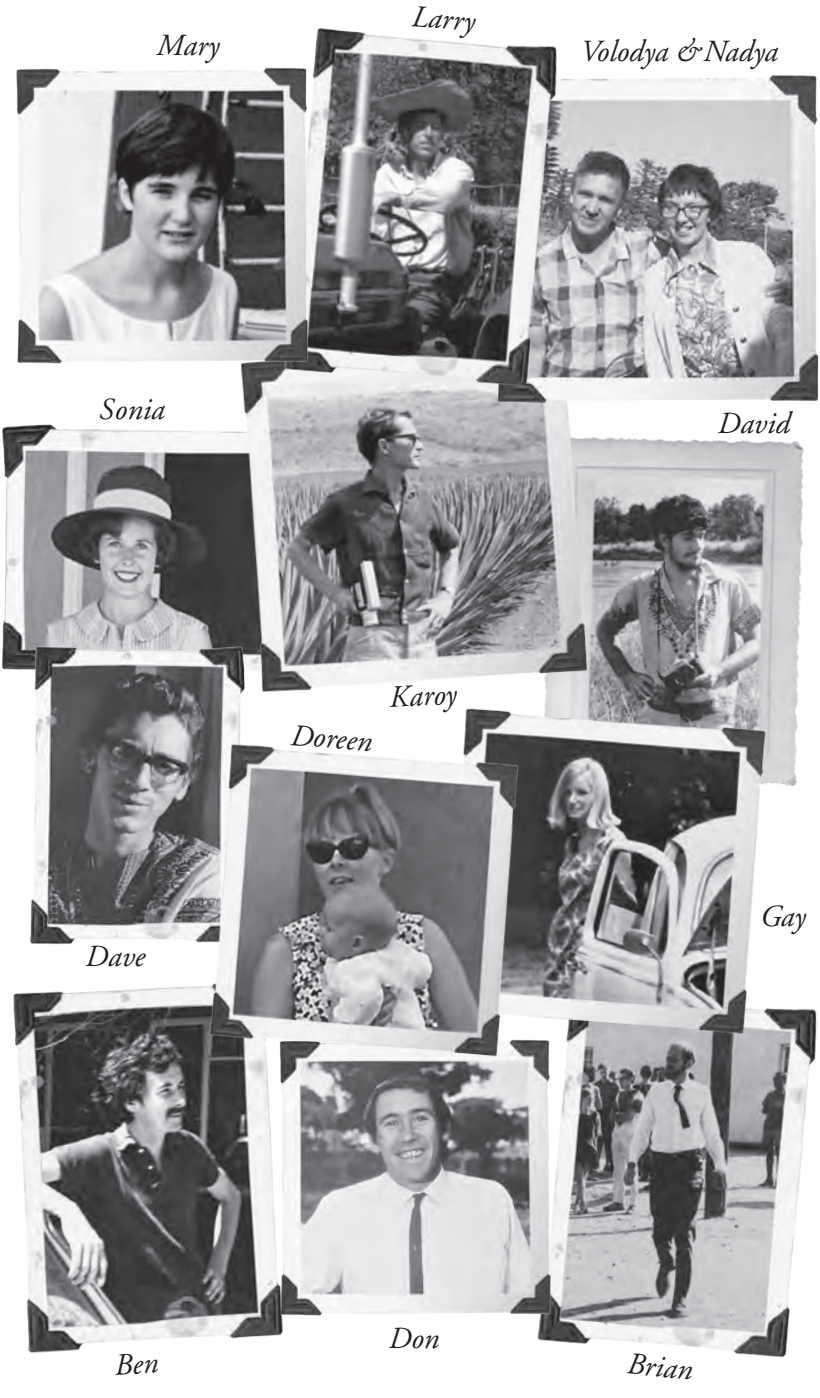
Mary
Larry
Volodya & Nadya
Sonia
David
Karoy
Doreen
Dave
Gay
Ben
Don
Brian

This story is a love letter to the hopeful time when Zambia was newly independent; to the people; to the landscape; and to those of us who came wanting to help and went away with more than we could ever give.

The events are supported by letters of the time, and the revisiting and retelling of memories over fifty years. Many individuals retain their names, others are changed for clarity, or altered to protect their experience when it conflicted with mine. Some details are condensed but hold the heart of the events as I recall them.

The Great East Road

Heads together, three men leaned over, under the raised hood of the one-ton flatbed truck. One man reached down into the guts of the motor, yanked out the snapped fan belt, lifted it over his head and let out one of the crudest of British curses.

Except for the curses they reminded me of my grandad, who ran a machine shop on the other side of the world in Canada. He was a genius at diagnosing ailing vehicles and, as a child, I had listened to him talk through a problem in words like crankshaft, gear box, fuel pump and rotor. I didn't understand them, but they had a comforting familiarity. The men under the hood of the broken-down truck used the same tone of voice and similar gestures as Grandpa, but I couldn't understand a word they said except for the emphatic cursing.

The truck was en route to Lundazi Secondary School, but was stalled on Zambia's Great East Road, in August of 1969. We were four hundred and thirty miles from Lusaka, the capital city, and seventy miles from the school, our destination and new home. Larry, my husband of eight weeks, and I climbed down from the truck cab and waited. The driver, in his white shirt and tattered tie, and the other men, one in a red shirt and the other in a blue shirt, slide-stepped down the road embankment and walked into the bush, each in a different direction. As they walked, they paused to run their fingers over the bark of several trees until the man in the blue shirt stopped at one tree and called the others over. The driver touched the tree with his fingertips, nodded, took a knife from his pocket, sliced open the grey bark and stripped out strands of orange, fibrous cambium.

Within minutes, the men had stretched and twisted the inner bark, woven it into a rope, measured it against the broken fan belt, connected the ends into a loop and attached the makeshift belt to the engine. Then, just like in a good movie, our hero, the driver, slammed down the hood, jumped back into the cab and turned the key.

The engine roared. The two men I called red shirt and blue shirt leapt over the sides of the truck into the back; we climbed back into the cab and were off.

One week before this fan belt repair, Larry and I had been in Lac Charlebois, Quebec, completing our CUSO orientation. We were part of a group of fifty idealistic Canadians in their early twenties, ready for adventure and full of confidence that we could contribute our skills to what was called, in 1969, the Third World. With input from Canadian experts, Western- trained African academics, and urban Zambians, we devoted hours to intense discussions about imperialism, colonialism, racism, African independence movements, cultural differences and culture shock. Together we ate, drank, talked and danced through all our waking hours. After Lac Charlebois, we moved like an ever-changing, soaring, multicoloured flock of birds, first to London, then on to Dar es Salaam. Some of the flock dispersed from Dar to postings in Tanzania, while others, including us, landed finally in Lusaka, where we were welcomed by Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's president. He shared with us his vision of Zambian Humanism, based on the values of interdependence rather than on Western individualism. We shared his belief about the importance of community and earnestly hoped to experience that in Zambia.

From Lusaka, Larry and I flew in a refurbished WWII DC-3 to Chipata, the capital of Eastern Province. The unpressurized former troop carrier flew low over the savannah. For one long, magical moment we looked down on the broad backs of dusty brown elephants, black shadows stretching from their feet as they moved through dry honey-coloured grass lit by shimmering afternoon light. That was the moment I believed we had truly arrived in Africa.

The school's headmaster had arranged for us to be picked up in Chipata, along with a load of supplies. When the one-ton flatbed truck pulled out of Chipata, we shared the cab with the driver. The load in the back was covered with roped-down tarps. Our two canvas duffle bags (WWII surplus from the Capital Iron store in Victoria) packed with everything we thought we would need over two years, were jammed into a space between the tarp and the sides of the flat deck. The driver gently eased my guitar and its flimsy pressed cardboard case into the back and promised it would travel safely.

Chipata Airport

When everything was ready, half a dozen men jumped into the back and balanced on the load or hunkered down along the edge.

Ten miles after the first fan belt repair with woven cambium, the engine began stuttering and stopped again. The men hopped out, found the cousin of the last tree, repeated all the steps and the journey began once more. The trip went stop-start through three more fibre fan belts.

I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, with characters running in and out of the foreign landscape in response to rules I didn't understand. It didn't help that we had minimal information about our destination. We had to trust it was somewhere along this road. We had found Lundazi on a basic map but had seen no photographs of the town. The one letter we'd received from the Canadian CUSO couple teaching there was full of warnings about the colonial attitudes of the British, the inept administration and the unruly students.

The fourth time the fan belt broke, Larry and I climbed down from the cab. Larry said, "Let's walk a bit. My legs are getting cramped."

"I figure we've covered fifty miles," I said. "We've got another seventy to go. Do you think we'll make it before dark? What if they can't fix it? Where will we sleep?"

Christopher and Mary

We walked along for a few hundred yards, in the direction of Lundazi. The road ahead lay flat and straight, diminishing until it hit the horizon, like an introductory exercise in perspective. Behind us, the same. The earth to the left and right, and the road itself, was rusty red, completely unlike the chocolate brown soil we knew from home. The trees were short with open branches, nothing like a cedar or a fir. Their leaves were rust and maroon with a few splashes of acidic lime green. Soon we'd learn these were the colours of August and the dry season.

We looked back to the truck, where most of the men leaned against its sides, smoking. The driver was still searching the bush for the right kind of tree bark. A mile or more down the road we saw a moving plume of golden-red dust. It grew into an expanding cloud drawn forward by a black box that got bigger and bigger until it became a Land Rover that stopped next to the broken-down truck. Then it started up again and headed for us.

The Land Rover pulled up beside us, and out stepped a Zambian police officer. His black, polished boots held their shine in defiance of the dust. His uniform was crisply pressed and he wore long tan socks rolled over just below his knees, held in place by a black tab garter.

"How can I help you? Sir? Madam?"

St. Christopher, I thought, Patron Saint of Travellers.

The nuns who taught at my elementary school had promised there was a saint to call on for all occasions. St. Christopher always appealed to me. I thought he was second only to St. Bernard and his dog, but St. Bernard was the saint to call on when you were lost in the Alps and here there was no snow in sight. St. Christopher was the perfect saint for this moment.

"We are happy to meet you. I am Larry and this is my wife, Mary. We are going to Lundazi. My wife and I will be teaching there. The headmaster is expecting us this afternoon, but as you can see, the lorry keeps breaking down."

"So, Mr. Larry (pronounced more like *rally*) I am happy to assist you. My name is Christopher Manda and I am travelling to the Boma in Lundazi."

I wondered if I had heard correctly and even checked for a halo.

He offered to carry us to Lundazi and to alert the school that the truck needed a new fan belt. Of course we accepted. I looked back towards our duffle bags. They had travelled ten thousand miles so far, but I resigned myself to never seeing them again.

I had romantic notions about Land Rovers, connected to movie images of safaris, lions and big game hunters. Christopher directed me to the front passenger seat, while Larry sat in the back seat of the sturdy and practical metal box on wheels, designed by the British to go anywhere. The space was tight and the minimally upholstered seats were not sprung. Metal bolts grazed my shins at every jolt over the corrugated road. Larry's shins jammed into a petrol can at every lurch.

There is an art to driving a washboard road. One theory says there is a perfect speed, not too fast, not too slow, that will take you over the peaks of the corrugations with a minimum of juddering. Christopher drove on the go-as-fast-as-you-can theory. The Land Rover was built to handle the thumping, but our bones rattled and jarred. Over the racket he told us about Lundazi.

"You will see we have a very nice Boma."

"What's a Boma?" I asked.

"It is the place of our government office. It is a very old word.

From the old times, it means a safe place for keeping the cattle." Christopher continued, "We are having three primary schools and one secondary school. And two churches, the R.C.s—you know, the Catholics—and the Presbyterians. There is a mosque. We have some shopkeepers, Asian. Mulla, he has the biggest store and the two petrol pumps. There is an airport, very big, just near the secondary school. The airport is necessary because of Lenshina, the crazy woman."

We wanted to know more about this story, but Christopher did not want to elaborate. He said there was an uprising, maybe five years ago, but all was calm now. Lenshina was dead and we should not worry. He changed the topic to emphasize that there was a good, clean hospital with two doctors, and a post office where you could send a telegram anywhere in the world.

"I am very sorry, but we are not having a bank. Two times a month, Barclay's Bank are coming with their special Land Rover which is carrying money. At that time, we police are providing guards."

Near the end of our journey together he said, "There is one thing in Lundazi, v-e-r-y famous. I will be showing you."

After seventy miles of mostly straight road and open forest on both sides, we could see the shapes of low buildings. We knew we had arrived when we saw two petrol pumps on the right hand side of the road. Christopher turned to the left as we entered the town and drove for about half a mile. He stopped in front of a scaled-down Norman castle built of sun-dried brick, the same colour as the soil around it. We stepped out of the Land Rover to have a look. The castle had two circular turrets two storeys high, capped with conical roofs. The doorways were arched like praying hands. Later we would discover the matched pair of elephant tusks that framed a doorway inside the castle.

"But what is this?" Larry asked. "Why is it here?"

"The D.C., the British district commissioner. He built the castle, starting in 1948. Now it is a hotel. It is also having a restaurant. If you come this way, I will show you the dam. The commissioner ordered the construction. Now the Lundazi River makes Lundazi Lake. From here we are getting our water for the town."

We followed him to the edge of a murky, weedy lake created by a

Lundazi Boma

hand-built earthen dam. In time we would learn the lake was home to a family of energetic hippos who had an impact on water quality in the dry season. We would drink, cook, clean and bathe in this water while Lundazi was our home.

Before we could grasp the incongruity of the Castle Hotel, Christopher got us back into the Land Rover and drove us through town. We went past two beer halls, with local beer brewing in recycled diesel drums propped over low fires. The centre of town was full of houses that must have been designed by the imaginative district commissioner. The red brick buildings, possibly intended for British colonial staff, were raised about six feet off the ground and supported by brick arches, two or three to a building. The houses looked like they were on stilts or reaching up on tippy toe, but for what reason? Whatever the original purpose of the arches, the current residents stored wood and bicycles under them.

Our tour was complete. Christopher delivered us to the school office and left us with the headmaster. We never saw our rescuer again.

The incidents along the Great East Road are so clear I can shut my eyes and watch them replay a full colour video of that day. From the moment of our arrival and through the first two days, the memories are rough snatches of impressions. I remember the warmth of the

headmaster's handshake. He was a Zambian who played no part in our history. He finished his contract soon after our arrival and Brian, British, stepped into the position. That was the first hint that staff changes would be a constant. I remember long one-storey buildings laid out on the open campus. Red dirt pathways connected the buildings. Whitewashed bricks embedded in the soil at 45 degree angles created zigzag borders along the paths. There were trees, many leafless, waiting out the dry season, and the grass was baked to a brown stubble.

The other Canadians, Barb and Len, tall and slender prairie people, welcomed us in for the first two nights. They introduced us to Lundazi's main street and helped us navigate its small shops. On the second day, the truck—that we had learned to call a lorry—arrived, fitted with its new fan belt, along with our precious luggage, nothing stolen, nothing damaged. I dug into my duffle bag, anxious to put on clean clothes, and chose an ankle length caftan I had sewn before we left Canada. Then Larry and I went off to explore the school site. We met Ben and Doreen, soon to become our new neighbours; and Dave and Joyce, who invited us to tea. Early in the introductions I exclaimed, "We've been married for just one month, three weeks and four days!" The precision of my announcement, while wearing what looked like a sturdy nightgown, provoked friendly teasing for the first few weeks.