

Creature comforts

I went back for more: more of the same. I didn't expect my second year in Zambia would, once again, turn my world upside down. I knew what I anticipated: the heat, the sun, the rainy season. There would be paperwork stamped in triplicate; mindless queues to conquer bureaucratic hurdles; and wonderful people who battled on to make the country a better place, whatever the system might throw their way. People such as Sherry, our maid, nanny, housekeeper and (given those job titles) general-preserver-of-sanity, who greeted us on our return.

"Welcome home, Madame! Welcome, Bwana!"

Her broad grin mirrored my excitement. We had spent a month living out of suitcases with various friends and family in the UK: I was delighted to be back. Sherry's face lit up when she saw my children.

"And hello Matthew! And Eleanor! Look at you! My, you have grown!"

Set free from the car, Eleanor rushed headlong at Sherry, who deftly caught my cherubic 21-month-old daughter and lifted her high into the air. Eleanor beamed with joy. Not wanting to be left out, Matthew (now three-and-a-half, and pretending to be a lot more grown up) clung to Sherry's leg. She took his hand and, chattering away, led them both inside, out of the blinding sunshine. Stephen and I followed, dragging our suitcases behind.

It was home – I knew it as soon as I stepped inside. Nothing had changed. The same dreary, brown concrete floor, hand-polished by Sherry to a glorious sheen every Thursday. The dreadful pink curtains, that were supposed to be ivory but there had been a miscommunication with the seamstress. The peculiar lighting system, that only allowed the living room light to be switched off at one end if it was on at the other.

I walked through, leaving the luggage in my bedroom with its draughty louvre windows. Each of the rooms along the corridor had doors to outside with missing keys and, like most houses in Zambia, heavy iron bars as protection from burglars. At the end I reached the gloomy bathroom, still with the broken, silvered mirror, yellowing shower-head and cracked basin that had greeted me when we'd arrived in Lusaka a year earlier.

For some reason, I had wanted to come back to all this. A year earlier I had dreaded leaving the UK and, on arrival, the idiosyncrasies of the house had not improved my mood. Yet twelve months had softened my viewpoint, and I was now wishing we had more time in Zambia. Just one year left before Stephen's medical research project would be completed, and I would tolerate any of the house's problems to live here. I was back to my life in Lusaka, and had so much to do.

I washed my hands and face, then returned to our bedroom to help Stephen unpack. He had heaved the first of our suitcases onto the bed.

"What did you put in here?" he said.

"Nothing more than you wanted. I just pack efficiently."

"Too efficiently."

"*Brownie Guide Handbook*," I declared. "If you'd read it, you would pack effectively too. Look!" The unzipped suitcase pinged open. "Nothing's moved. It all stayed in one piece and we won't have to re-iron everything."

"Hmmp," he said. "It's not as though you even do the ironing. That's Precious' job."

Our other maid, Precious, came in the afternoons to do the washing (by hand) and ironing. Sensing that Stephen's counterargument might overpower my defence, I made a tactical retreat in search of a cup of tea.

Passing through the living room I noticed Matthew and Eleanor had already pulled out a basket of toys and were playing happily. I could hear Sherry in the kitchen. She emerged carrying a tray with tea already made and laid it on the dining table, just out of my sight.

"Thank you, Sherry!"

"Madame." She bobbed her head, smiling, and withdrew to the kitchen.

"Stephen! There's tea if you want it!" I called.

A sound that I guessed to be a muffled, "Coming!" returned to me. I stepped into the dining room. It was then that I saw the flowers.

They weren't anything stunning, no fancy arrangement or vast vase of blooms. They were a handpicked bunch placed in a glass jam jar in the middle of the table. Orange, red, yellow: a blaze of colour. Flowers picked from our garden, some of them beginning to wilt.

If they had been arranged by the finest florist in fashionable London they would have had less impact. Sherry must have put them there earlier, with no prompting or encouragement: a simple gesture to welcome us home. To me they were worth a million dollars.

Biting my lip to hold back tears, I poured the tea, wondering why I deserved such generosity. Then I sat and stared at the flowers, warmed more by love than by the mug of tea.

As the light poured out from the open fridge, I could have sworn I saw something scuttle away underneath. I

stared at the spot on the floor where I thought it had been, waiting for it to reappear. Nothing. Perhaps I'd imagined it. I could hear nothing but the silent hum of the fridge and the distant croaking of frogs. Three o'clock in the morning was too early for the cockerels in Kalingalinga, or the peacocks in the neighbouring road.

I took out the orange juice and placed it to one side. Stephen, who had Type 1 Diabetes, was hypoglycaemic and needed the sugary drink. There was an irony in this nocturnal visit to the fridge. Forget the need for beds, tables and chairs: when we had arrived the previous year the fridge had been the most important item of furniture missing from the house. A fridge allowed me to keep milk cool and fresh, and to freeze mushed up food in ice-cubes as I weaned my baby daughter. In my rush to acquire one, it had never crossed my mind that the fridge was also necessary to store Stephen's insulin, so low down was he on my list of concerns. My mind had been focused on protecting my children. I was so furious with my husband for dragging us to Africa that his needs had come a very poor second.

The refrigerator had been our first Zambian acquisition and, for me, the first sign that there could be normality in this strange land. Not only could I buy a fridge in the shops, just like in the UK, but I had a choice of models, size and design. Better still, it had been delivered the next day, at the time they specified – a quality of service that had not always been replicated on every occasion since, mind you.

Now, in the middle of our first night back in Lusaka, it wasn't the children but Stephen I was worrying about. I had a hierarchy of options when Stephen was hypoglycaemic: Lucozade, orange juice, piece of chocolate. I rarely had to resort to giving him the last one, though it often calmed my nerves after a bad attack. If we were out, then stopping for a very sugary coffee usually did the trick. The hypos didn't happen often, but I did resent their disturbance in the middle of the night and I was cursing my foolishness at not replenishing the stock of Lucozade. Still, the orange would have to do.

I stared at the chocolate on the fridge shelf, tempting me as it had done all day. *No! I have the juice. I'll remain strong.* I shut the fridge door and lost all light. The fridge shuddered as its systems switched off then, ominously, I heard a scratching noise from behind.

In my haste to flick on the main light switch I knocked the carton, spilling sticky juice all over the kitchen surface. I swore and reached for a cloth. It was underneath the plate I'd left in the sink after a cheeky late-night slice of toast. A procession of ants was marching across the draining board and straight to the remaining crumbs. If it hadn't been the middle of the night I might have enjoyed watching them for a while, as they picked up bits of toast half their bodyweight and carried them back home. Instead I splashed water into the washing-up bowl, killing a few of God's creatures, and retrieved the cloth.

Turning back I thought I heard the scratching again. I stared intently under the fridge. Nothing emerged. No sound. I was probably safe.

Involuntarily, I shivered. Night-time was the worst. All the creatures seemed to be out and none of them wanted you to see them, except the moths that now were flapping around the bare light bulb overhead. It had only been a couple of minutes and already there were three dancing for their lives.

Wiping up the juice I thought back to when we had been in the UK a few weeks earlier. Travelling from my father's to my parents-in-law's Stephen had turned greyer and greyer, until I'd had to pull over to allow him to be sick. Ever the sympathetic nurse, I wasn't too pleased that I wouldn't be able to share the burden of driving the comparatively long journey, and even less pleased at the prospect of him throwing up all over the hire car. We eventually got to Norwich where he spent a feverish night with frequent visits to the bathroom.

At the time it had only been a few days since leaving Zambia, so I had my emergency radar on full alert. The symptoms were consistent with malaria and none of the rest of us felt ill. I knew he had to get checked out. Therein lay the battle: my husband was a doctor, so didn't do hospitals except to work in them. "But it's the dry season. There isn't malaria in Lusaka," he had complained. I had ignored his remarks and driven him to A&E, leaving the children to have some quality time with Grannie and Grampa.

Norwich isn't a hotbed for malaria. The hospital was newly built and only recently opened, so the facilities were fantastic. The nurse had taken an armful of blood and, while it was sent for testing in the laboratory, the medical care had gone into overdrive and checked him out for anything else that might be a problem. He was sent for a chest X-ray and had an ECG, so we were confident that his heart and lungs worked satisfactorily. His blood sugars were taken regularly which, given his diabetes, was to be expected. Neither of us was surprised that they were all over the place (a common result of fighting infections).

After four hours the malaria blood tests had finally come back negative. By that time he was feeling better and we'd already self-diagnosed a virus, to be treated with patience and lots of fluids. He retreated to his parents' house to rest.

Back in Lusaka, I finished mopping up the juice. It was winter, a time of minimal threat of malaria. It was also too late at night (or early in the morning) for the crepuscular malarial mosquitoes to be a concern. My trek to the kitchen had merely been threatened by mice, moths and ants. *Honestly girl, I thought, in a country where lions and leopards roam wild, these are hardly the most dangerous of predators.*

I took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with juice, returned the carton to the fridge, switched off the

kitchen light and began to head back to the bedroom.

Then I had second thoughts. I opened the fridge again. *It was forward thinking, surely, to take the chocolate too...* just in case...?