

## NEWSLETTER FROM CATHY BUCKLE IN ZIMBABWE



### The Goodbye Store and lost dreams

20 August 2021

Dear Family and Friends

Out in the country life is slow and dusty this August in Zimbabwe. Winter has dragged on into spring this year and people are still wearing woolly hats and jackets against the biting wind and at night our beds are heavy with blankets.

On a recent road trip with friends the feeling of travelling half a century back in time was palpable. On the roads teams of donkeys pulling carts were more plentiful than cars. Goats and pigs, cattle and turkeys have right of way and always they are being minded by children who have been out of school almost continually for the past eighteen months. Crucial childhood learning has been lost to Covid restrictions in rural areas where online learning is non-existent, as are computers or even internet connections. Parents without access to any educational resources, not even reading books, have had no option but to turn their children to chores: chop wood, carry water, tend to livestock.

Piled on top of high shrubs and wedged in the forks of trees the maize crop residue, stalks and leaves, (mashanga) is out of reach of goats which have nibbled everything everywhere, right down to the very dust underfoot. At the 'growth points' and 'business centres' litter lies thick on the roadsides, plastic bags and bottles strewn everywhere and snagged in grass and shrubs and you can't help but wonder what local authorities are doing and where their sense of pride is. A dishevelled man walks on the road dragging a small tree behind him and carrying a brown plastic bottle of Chibuku beer and half a loaf of bread. The tree branches take the whole lane of the road and I slow down to navigate around the man and his tree wondering what his story is, what his dreams were and how his life in Zimbabwe has left him doing this. I pass the Goodbye Store and Butchery and the name is appropriate and heart rending 21 years into the twenty first century.

Crossing bridges in remote dusty areas you wait while youngsters with carts loaded with water containers try desperately to stop their team of mules from being distracted by a lone runaway donkey going the other way. A couple with two children and a bicycle navigate the bridge crossing with a pair of oxen pulling a cart loaded with over two dozen 20 litre water containers. On the side of the cart in faded, chipped white paint are the words 'Rome wasn't built in a day,' and I am struck by the poignant message of hope, someone's long lost dream, waiting to be fulfilled forty one years after Zimbabwe's independence.

As we drive further, the poverty and hardship are almost too painful to see and I cannot help but think about the damning Auditor General's reports for 2019 on local authorities which have just been released.

The Auditor General writes about stands being sold in Gweru but no record of who to, how much for or where the money went; of Mutare Council not banking all the cash they collected; of Bindura Council billing accounts with no names which had been created by unknown system users; of Masvingo Council collecting but not depositing parking fees and of not having detailed records of rented properties and lease agreements so revenue could not be accounted for; of no comprehensive record of fuel use in Masvingo and no register of who was drawing down fuel or what for; of Marondera Council not maintaining a list of rented properties and lease agreements and only providing 13.5 megalitres of water to the town a day against a demand of 27 megalitres a day; of Chegutu where 80% of residences have non functional water meters. These few examples were the tip of the iceberg in yet another damning report out of Zimbabwe with no sign of accountability anywhere on the horizon.

When we arrive at our destination the ugliness is gone and the pain evaporates; the river is a vast wide sandy expanse, a few silver curves of water remain and peacefulness descends. We have come to this beautiful wilderness in Zimbabwe to do what we know best in order to survive the struggle and trauma of life here: a few precious days to be healed by the beauty and to capture images that will stay in our memory in the times ahead. The beauty of the wilderness is timeless; baboons sifting the sand for seeds, towering, leafless baobabs, the scream of a fish eagle, a lone male waterbuck bending quickly to drink before slipping silently back into the bush and later, under a stunning night sky ablaze with stars, come the whooping calls of the hyenas and the far away grunting of a lion. A shooting star falls through the sky and we make a wish, mine is for our beleaguered land.

There is no charge for this Letter From Zimbabwe but if you would like to donate please visit my website. Until next time, thanks for reading this Letter From Zimbabwe, now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year, and my books about life in Zimbabwe, a country in waiting.

Love Cathy

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