

## A Whimsical Memory

In 1979 when Uganda was invaded by the Liberators- a combination of Tanzanian soldiers, Ugandans who had fled the country to escape the terrors of Idi Amin and possibly mercenaries- our house in Mbarara was ravaged, pillaged, looted. What remained after the looting – beds, some tables and chairs and a rickety cooker – we carried up the hill and stored in a room at the administration building. Several months later we began to re-equip the house so that it would be habitable once again. The Liberators remained in Uganda for two years.

Towards the end of that two years news reached us that a date had been set for this occupying force to vacate the country. We heard the news with alarm. Memories of a marauding armed force surfaced along with the fear that on the way out they would once again pass our door and be unable to resist emptying the house. The prospect of another looting set our teeth on edge.

This called for a community meeting. And so we sat together in the community room to consider the issue and see if there was any advance preparation we could do. There was no way that we could hide the essential furnishings and equipment but the question arose: if the house was looted once again and we had to start from scratch, what were the essentials we would need, where could we hide them? In our minds the question was a bit like: what essentials would we need if the world was destroyed by a nuclear disaster and we had survived? It was a tough question. And how would we manage to hold on to those essentials even if we knew what they were? One suggestion was that we fill a trunk with the essentials, dig a hole and bury the trunk in a hole in the garden. All agreed that that sounded like a good idea. Not wanting to arouse curiosity, we would bury it near our rubbish pit. However it would have to be a superior kind of hole to that usually dug to take our rubbish. Who would dig the pit and what reason would we give for commissioning a large, regular, quality-type hole – a designer hole, so to speak??



Dona had an idea. There was an elderly man (possibly 45-50) who worked at St Helen's school across the road. He was a compound man, general operative, trustworthy and not too nose-y and she would discuss the issue of digging a pit without disclosing the intended purpose. All agreed and Dona set off on her mission. The deal was made and we kept tight-lipped about the motive while

watching the hole grow deeper. It had to be the size of the trunk with a bit to spare and enough space on top to cover the trunk with soil and therefore camouflage the burial site.

The next challenge was to discern what would go into the trunk. That took several meetings and much hysterical laughter. Well, we could do with a paraffin lamp or two. That would help us in the dark of night. Of course, that would be no use without oil. That made several items. Lamps, containers of oil. Then we would need something to light it with- matches. Would they survive the damp of the underground and how long might the trunk be buried anyway without the ants eating the contents? Of course, a torch or two would be invaluable. Then we would need batteries. Having light would be no good if we didn't have a blanket or two to cover ourselves with. Okay, some blankets. Then what about food? There was no question of burying food – well, maybe we could bury a few tins of food? We could buy some food locally but we would need something to cook it in. Saucepans, sufurias (cooking pots with no handles) were added to the list. Maybe we

should think of a few plates, cups, cutlery. The discussion went on. The list of survival items multiplied. And multiplied.

A large black trunk was identified and taken to a small spare bedroom. It lay open in the bedroom as we packed in the goods. Many trips were paid to the bedroom adding bits to the trunk- taking some out, re-arranging for more compact packing. The heavier items at the bottom; smaller bits tucked in at the sides. Blankets and soft items were wrapped around the jagged and breakable items. Economy of space and good packing were crucial. Were there papers, documents that it would be important to safeguard? What about passports? Item after item was added, tucked in, pressed down, overflowing. Would the lid close on it now?



By now the hole was dug and lay empty as passers-by looked at it in bewilderment. It was a fine substantial, regular hole. The digger had followed the specifications and it was a finer hole than had been seen in the hill for a long time. Empty.

Then a major question arose. When exactly would we bury the trunk? We didn't want to bury it sooner than necessary and have our good contents mouldering under the ground invaded by worms and ants. Neither did we want to be caught unawares. Diane's suggestion was that we wait till we hear the army marching up the hill and then rush to the bedroom, grab the trunk and drag it up the hill to the waiting hole. Hilarity. We tested that proposal. Several of us grasping the trunk from different angles and trying to heave it off the floor. No Joy. It was immovable.

And so it rested there. The army in due course vacated the country without passing our door or invading our space. Bit by bit we emptied the trunk putting everything back in its previous home. Gradually the designer hole became a rubbish pit and that item was deleted from the agenda of our community meetings.

However, the fun and laughter that we had lifted our spirits during those strange times and the memory of our innocent plans and fun lingers all these years later.

Helen Lane.

PS. Although Dona was a key player in this tale, she has no memory of it. It just shows how subjective memories are and how some of us delete the non-essentials from our brain while others hold on to the quirky.