

Journeys.

I have a vivid memory of a journey from Lorengedwat, Karamoja to Kampala. It was sometime between 1986-1991. In travelling upwards to Karamoja I left the car in Mbale at a Mission/Parish house and went to Karamoja with the sisters in their Landrover. The car which I left behind was a Toyota and didn't have a four-wheel drive and thus was very dodgy on muddy roads as another tale will testify. Following the visit to the sisters in Lorengedwat, I needed to make my way back south and that was the challenge.



I left the Lorengedwat house as dawn was breaking accompanied by the sisters of the community- Brigid Stokes, Francis Burke and Anastazia. I remember the walk along the dusty path to the main road. People emerged from their houses- shadowy figures against the faint light of the rising sun. My thought was: This is like Eden- the beginning of

time. There was something so primordial, beautiful and unforgettable about that moment. I still see it in my mind. In my bag I had the picnic they had prepared for me for the journey.

We wended our way to the road and looked hopefully in the direction of Moroto to see if any vehicle was coming our way that we could flag down and ask for a lift. All was still and no vehicle moved. We waited and waited. Eventually there was a suggestion of dust rising on the horizon and our spirits lifted. The dust continued to swirl and come closer and eventually a rickety landrover came into sight. We waved and flagged and it stopped close to us. Inside was a certain Fr Francis, a Muganda priest who ministered in Karamoja, a nurse called Catherine and one or two others. I was welcomed and sat in front beside Fr Francis and Catherine and the ancient Landrover cranked to life and off we went waving goodbye to the sisters who had accompanied me. We passed several river beds that were swollen with flooding and having navigated the Irish bridges the bottom of the vehicle was wet and needed some time to dry out before we could continue. Thus several delays. Then at one point on the road we were flagged down by some soldiers wielding guns. We stopped and they clambered in sitting awkwardly in the back and on top of goods, their guns lying beside them. The journey continued with several more stops.



Several hours later the hunger pangs began to rumble in my stomach. No one mentioned food but it began to loom large in my mind with the awareness that I had in my bag a small picnic designed for one. I certainly couldn't sink my teeth into it – much as I longed to- while ignoring the multitude that sat and sprawled in the vehicle with me- and yet it was so small and inadequate to feed all. I fought an internal and silent battle... could I be simple enough to take out the small lunch and see

how far it would go? Hunger rather than humility prevailed. I slipped my hand into the bag and withdrew the package. Obviously Fr Francis as the driver (and the priest!) had to get the lion's share. The sandwich was divided. The tomato cut up and the mango sliced and everyone has something to eat. It was all passed around and the morsels welcomed. A touch of the Loaves and Fishes.

Arriving in Mbale, I bade farewell to my fellow travellers, collected the car and set off for the south. I aimed at reaching Namagunga that night and spending the night with the Franciscan sisters as well as visiting Teresa Bateta who was studying there. I stopped at Jinja to purchase a few supplies to bring to Teresa and then headed to the outskirts of the town and the road to Namagunga. Very shortly there was an unexpected development- a barrier across the road. People came to the car window and said that an accident had happened further along the road. They mentioned an overturned lorry. The road was blocked, they said and I could take a detour through the bush that would circle around the accident site and reconnect me with the road further along. Dusk was falling and I pulled in to the side of the road to consider this development. I sat in the car undecided and wondering what I should do. The road named as the detour was a small mud road to my left- unknown and unexplored and dark was falling. Should I risk it or not? I really wanted to reach Namagunga that night. As I sat there wondering what to do a small green battered car pulled up alongside me. A man- a stranger- rolled down his window and said: 'You shouldn't be driving on your own at this hour and in this place.' I explained that I was aiming at reaching Namagunga and that I had been told that the road ahead was blocked. Ignoring that he repeated: 'You should not be driving here on your own at this hour. Turn back and stay in Jinja tonight.' I mumbled on: 'If I can reach Namagunga, I have a place to stay for the night. Do you think it is safe to take the detour?' He repeated: 'Turn back. Follow me. If you haven't a place to stay, I will find a safe place for you for the night.' Finally in exasperation he said: 'Suit yourself. But that is my advice.' Startled and influenced by his vehemence, I turned the car around and followed him. Somewhere along the road, he stopped, I overtook him but made my way to a local hotel and looked for a room for the night. My memory is of having something to eat in the hotel, getting a room which had a bath but no running water. In the bath was a jerrycan of water with a banana for a stopper. When it came to washing I removed the banana and attempted to heave the jerrycan over my naked body for a shower.

Next morning I retraced my steps and headed on the road to Namagunga, expecting to find the same roadblock. Nothing. Tentatively I continued expecting to arrive at the site of the accident. Nothing. I arrived at Namagunga and asked: 'Was there an accident on the road last evening? Was the road blocked?' No -one knew.

All these years later I still wonder was it a scam. Did I meet an Angel in disguise who averted danger from my path? Who intervened to keep a stranger safe? I will never know but over the years I have often prayed in thanksgiving for the stranger in the green battered car (an earth angel) who took the trouble to advise a foolish woman travelling on her own at dusk on a Ugandan road.

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