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Choosing Africa: A Midlife Journey from Mission to Meaning

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Choosing Africa

A Midlife Journey from Mission to Meaning

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Chapter 1

A Handful of Leaves

Our overnight Air Afrique flight from New York to Dakar, Senegal, had spilled us out into the transit lounge of the Yoff International Airport for our four-hour layover. My lanky husband struggled to find a comfortable position for a nap on the hard plastic chair next to mine. Despite the sticky heat and the filthy toilets, I was happy to pass those hours watching busy Africans in their colorful clothes. The men sauntered past in their brocade dashikis and elaborately embroidered *boubous*, loose-fitting shirts worn over matching trousers. No less elegant were the women in their vivid blues, greens, and yellows. Most wore tight wrap-around skirts and matching full-sleeved blouses, nipped in at the waist and flared to the hips. These were the well-heeled international African travelers. At the back of the lounge, sitting not sauntering, were tired-looking men in crumpled white shirts and trousers a bit too short for their limbs. Their wives wore Western-styled suits of soft blue and pale pink. Surrounding them was their luggage: huge shopping bags of red, white, and blue woven plastic, the kind of material I recalled seeing on lawn chairs. While I waited, I tried to pick up snatches of French conversation.

When our flight to Niamey, Niger, was announced, a herd of swarthy-looking men in long white robes charged out of the first-class lounge, and started pushing their way to the front of the line. I remembered this was an open-seating flight. Lou grabbed my hand.

“Stand your ground!” he said. “We were here first.”

As we hurried across the dusty tarmac to the aircraft, the white-robed ones grumbling in our wake, I remembered the village feasts to which our study group had been invited the previous year. It was always the same. While villagers gathered in the open space outside the chief’s hut and stared at our group of thirteen Americans and five drivers, the elaborately garbed village chief would say a few words of welcome. Well, more than a few. After ten minutes, everyone’s gaze was fixed upon whole roasted goat on the table in front of us. The poor creature looked as if he had simply fallen asleep in the sun. There were huge bowls of *foufou* (millet porridge), rice, and groundnut stew, and plenty of bottles of Orange Fanta, Coke, and Sprite. I could tell,

from the expectant twitching of the crowd, that the chief was winding down. As soon as he finished speaking, the villagers surged forward and attacked the groaning board, yanking greasy hunks of meat from the sacrificial goat and filling their plates with huge spoonfuls of everything else. We had already learned an African lesson about he who hesitates.

Happy to find two seats together, Lou and I settled in for the flight to Niamey with, we had been told, a brief refueling stop in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The pilot announced that we might experience some turbulence from the typical evening thunderstorms. I watched Lou's knuckles turning white on the armrest as the aircraft rocked and rolled its way across West Africa.

We landed in Ouga in dusty twilight. The pilot said we'd only be on the ground a short time, so we would not disembark. We didn't know it then, but "short time" is what Africans say when they want to make sure you don't grow impatient with delays. This particular short time lasted one hour. Then two. Finally, the pilot said a small repair was needed, and we were welcome to disembark—for another short time. As we left the aircraft, we saw the white-robed ones scrambling for empty rows of seats in the middle section.

Only one other plane was sitting on the tarmac, and it didn't seem in a hurry to depart. The two small concession stands in the terminal had closed for the night. My eyes felt gritty and I tried to calculate how many hours I'd been awake. From time to time, Lou would walk out onto the tarmac to check on the progress of the repairs. Several workmen seemed to be holding a conference around the left landing gear. Finally, at 4:00 a.m., one of the flight attendants said we could board the aircraft. The white-robed ones were all sleeping soundly, row after row of them, in the middle section. Thirty minutes passed. Lou got up and walked to the front of the plane. When he returned, his face looked grim.

"I stood at the door with a Peace Corps Volunteer, and we watched this guy in dark trousers and a white shirt. His tie was tucked into his shirt. He kept taking off the wheel, examining it, and putting it back on. Susan, it was the flight attendant!"

Forty minutes later, the pilot announced that the aircraft was ready to depart, and would we please put on our seat belts. Somehow, seat belts seemed inadequate for the crash landing I knew awaited us. I also worried about our friend, John, waiting for us at the Niamey airport. Our flight was already twelve hours overdue.

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When we began our descent to Niamey, I looked out the window and saw what appeared to be military vehicles on either side of a runway at the farthest edge of the field.

“Uh oh,” said Lou. “Look at those tanks. Remember what we read last week? That there was a bomb threat at this airport?”

All the passengers applauded when we touched down, jostled but safe. The vehicles turned out to be fire engines, and the firefighters were rolling up their hoses while we walked across the tarmac.

I’d never had the slightest interest in traveling to Africa. If I wanted heat, humidity and bugs, I could rent a cottage without air conditioning at the beach. I knew as little about the continent as most other Americans, but a chance encounter in May 1992 changed my thinking. I had accompanied my husband to the annual weekend gathering of Lutheran clergy and laity in North Carolina. I’m still not sure why I had decided to go. Conventions and conferences always made me feel shy, awkward, and uncomfortable, so I tended to avoid this sort of event. I put on my best pastor’s wife smile and joined the other clergy spouses gathered for breakfast in the college’s dining hall. After we refilled our coffee cups, a vibrant, gray-haired lady stood up and said, “I will be leading a study tour to West Africa in November. If anyone is interested, I have brochures.” Edna explained that before she retired she had worked for Lutheran World Relief, an organization dedicated to providing assistance in developing countries. I stuffed a brochure in my handbag.

The following afternoon, during our drive home to Chapel Hill, I found the pamphlet and read it to Lou. “It seems as if there will be about a dozen people in the group, and for three weeks they’re going to visit LWR projects in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Things like irrigation and gardening, well drilling, women’s empowerment, and literacy. Apparently, LWR has a regional representative who lives in Niger—an American fellow—who will oversee the trip.” This was sounding more interesting than I’d thought.

I expected Lou to say that the cost, about \$4,000, was much more than we could afford. Instead, he began telling me how we could squeeze the money from several savings accounts and arrange the time away from our jobs. I caught his enthusiasm and tossed it back. We could probably persuade Jason, our 22-year-old son, to move back home from his apartment on the other side of town and take care of his 16-year-old sister during the three weeks we’d be in Africa. We were still chattering when we pulled into our driveway two hours later. Of course, we wanted to see the good work those Lutherans were

doing in West Africa but, to be honest, it was the adventure that was reeling us in.

When Lou and I had become engaged in 1967, we wove together dreams of living abroad and raising bilingual children. But dreams had given way to duty, and we had slipped into a more conventional track for a clergy family. For most of the next twenty-five years, Lou had served as a parish pastor in various congregations and I had learned how to be a minister's wife, a role for which I had absolutely no training. My parents had not been churchgoers, and I had taken myself to Sunday services and youth group activities. Halfway through college, I was so young and so head-over-heels in love with my tall, handsome divinity-school graduate, I never once thought about what it might be like to raise a family in a series of church-owned parsonages. Some clergy spouses resented the fishbowl life in which parishioners always seemed to know exactly what was going on in their families. I had not minded that aspect very much because our congregations had almost always treated us kindly. What I did mind, though, were all the nights and weekends my husband was engaged with church meetings and other people's problems. We had so little time together. I had begun to wonder what had become of those two dreamers who had thought their life together would be unique, even adventurous.

When we moved to the university town of Chapel Hill, a physician in the congregation asked me if I'd like to work for him. John was the chairman of one of the medical school's ethics committees, its Institutional Review Board. The board's task, said John, was to review research protocols and clinical trials, many of which were designed for desperately ill patients. Within a year, I was the director of the University of North Carolina's School of Medicine's Office for Human Research Studies. For the first time in my life I felt as if I, like my husband, had a calling, a vocation that mattered. As much as I loved this job, I was asking myself if this was what I still wanted to be doing ten or twenty years from now. When I shared those thoughts with Lou, he confessed that life had begun to feel flat for him, too.

A three-week trip to Africa offered an exciting diversion. We renewed our passports, updated our vaccinations, and read travel books. I learned that West Africans consider it disrespectful for women to wear slacks, so I bought cotton skirts and dresses. We obtained a prescription for anti-malaria pills and went to a camping store to buy their strongest insect repellent. I listened to French-conversation cassette tapes while driving to work to reacquaint myself with the language. Our friends and family considered us brave and adventurous for choosing such an exotic vacation.

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Lou and I joined ten other people on the study tour. We were a diverse bunch: from the young professional couple in their twenties to the 79-year-old widow who was fulfilling her life's dream. Excitement ran high, and the complaints were surprisingly few. For three weeks, we traveled the rough roads of West Africa, visiting mud-hut villages and women's empowerment projects. Everywhere we went, the villagers greeted us with dancing and singing and their gentle hospitality. The children giggled, pointed, and sang songs to us. We slept in tiny hotels and freshly-swept huts. We learned to eat *foufou* and chewy pieces of goat.

In Burkina Faso we met a retired government official who said, "We watch your TV shows, like *Dallas*, and we see that you Americans have so much. Why can't you share with the poor who have so little?" Although we tried to assure him that most of America was not like what he saw on *Dallas*, his question wouldn't go away.

West Africa not only saturated my senses, it assaulted my conscience. Against the romantic images of teeming markets and Fulani dancers were the ragged village farmers, the polio victims pushing themselves along the dusty road in their wooden carts, and the children. Always the children.

On our final day in West Africa, Lou and I were sitting at a small table in an outdoor café with John, the Lutheran World Relief tour guide who had been living in West Africa for seven years. We sipped our Cokes and watched the market women peddling bananas and fried pastries. When Lou asked John, "What, exactly, is it like to be an American who lives here?" I knew that he had already begun to wonder, "Is there any way we could do this?"

At the time, the thought was too big for me. I had too many "Yes, but..." thoughts.

Yes, but our children needed us.

Yes, but what about our secure, lucrative jobs?

Yes, but what would we actually *do* in Africa? We weren't exactly trained for development work.

Back home, we gave the expected talks and slide shows. As the months passed, I noticed that my friends' eyes would glaze over when I kept talking about those three weeks. "Do you know that the illiteracy rate for women in Mali is sixty percent?" They nodded politely. "And that literacy is the key to a better life for those women and their children?" They were grateful when I switched the subject.

Meanwhile, Lou and I bought more books and maps, and as we pored over them, I remembered our premarital scheming and dreaming. We may have missed out on rearing bilingual children, but perhaps it wasn't too late to

make something of those dreams after all. Maybe we really could do something worthwhile in Africa. And have an adventure, too.

We were no longer twenty-somethings, and we knew a lot was at stake. Figuring out how to finance such an undertaking was only one of our concerns. If we moved to Africa, we would probably have to sell our house and put our possessions into storage. Could we undertake such a venture with a daughter still in college? Would our children feel abandoned? And what about my elderly parents? What if our yearning was nothing more than the foolishness of two middle-aged warblers who knew they'd soon be sitting on an empty nest? I knew those guided, protected, three weeks in Africa bore little resemblance to real expatriate life, but how could we know what that life would be like unless we could somehow sample it? Somehow, we would need to test our desire and own physical stamina.

We wrote to John in Niger. He said that he could provide us with a Lutheran World Relief vehicle if we wanted to visit West Africa on our own. His assistant, Yacouba, would be honored to be our driver, guide, and translator. Now, almost one year to the day of our previous departure, we had returned to West Africa. Inside the terminal, John and Yacouba were waiting for us. "I had invited a group of my friends to meet you here last night, but I sent them home to bed around midnight." Our sleepy friend chuckled when we told him our tale.

"I guess I never told you my name for this airline. *Air Tragique*."

By the time we reached John's home in Niamey, I'd lost track of how many hours I'd been awake. When Yacouba finished unloading our luggage from the Land Cruiser, John handed him a few coins and asked him to buy some fresh bread at the *boulangerie* down the road.

"Why don't you both take a shower?" He gestured toward the bathroom. "I'll make some coffee, and we'll have some croissants and fruit. Then we can all have a lie-down." John had been awake all night, too.

Although I'd been yearning for a chance to get horizontal, I was too exhausted, or maybe too excited, to sleep. I listened to bees buzzing on the flowers outside the window of the little guest room, and wondered about the coming weeks. The itinerary John and Yacouba had proposed at breakfast included trips to some remote places with exotic-sounding descriptions. We might even travel to Timbuktu.

Later that evening, I sat in John's kitchen watching him prepare dinner. He was soaking carrots in a mild bleach solution in his sink.

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"If you find yourselves living in West Africa, you'll have to do this, too. You don't want to know the sort of water the locals use to water their fruits and veggies."

While the stew simmered on the stove, we sat on John's screened front porch nibbling cheese and crackers. I looked up at the thatched roof.

"What's that crackling noise, John?"

"Oh—those are termites. I have to replace this roof every year or so."

When we awakened the next morning and walked into the living room, John and Yacouba were stashing canned food, plastic plates, cups, and cutlery into a metal footlocker.

"We've loaded the Land Cruiser with two cases of bottled water," said John. "You can always buy more along the way. And we've strapped some chairs, camp beds, and mattresses on the top."

While we sipped John's good, strong French press coffee and spread jam on the baguettes still warm from the bakery, Yacouba proposed a small change in the itinerary.

"I would be honored if you both could come to my village. It is called Sorbon Goungou. It is really an island in the Niger River. We could go there for two or three days, and then continue our trip. It will only take us two hours to get there from here."

Lou and I exchanged quick glances and nodded. This was exactly the sort of encounter we'd been hoping to have, the chance to spend some time with villagers in their own environment.

"The honor would be ours," said Lou.

Yacouba parked the Land Cruiser under a tree near the riverbank and handed some money to a young man who would watch it while we were visiting Sorbon Goungou. He carefully loaded our gear into the pirogue: camp beds, sheets, mosquito nets, two boxes of food, a carton of bottled water, ice chest, and our suitcase and tote bags, an embarrassingly huge array of supplies for our two-day visit to the tiny island village. Holding my sandals in my left hand, I waded out to the boat and reached for Yacouba's outstretched palm. Yacouba exchanged a few quick words in Djerma with the bare-chested young man who would row us across the river, and we began our fifteen-minute trip.

A dozen grinning children in tattered T-shirts were waiting for us on the edge of the island. One little fellow waded into the muddy water and pulled our craft ashore. A young teenaged girl grasped my hand and pulled me up the sandy riverbank. She told me, in the easy-to-understand French of West Africans, that her name was Beba Sumana. The children grabbed our gear,

hoisted it to their heads, and marched, single-file, to the village. Disturbing movie memories filled my mind: white men in khaki shorts and knee socks tramping through the jungle followed by a procession of African porters. I wondered what the adults in the village would think of these two Americans with all their gear. When we arrived, Yacouba showed us the mud hut that would be our home for the next two days and hurried away. Perhaps he was going to tell his father that we were here. A young woman smiled at us while she continued vigorously sweeping the dirt floor. Our neighborhood was an assortment of mud-brick huts with pointy, thatched roofs. I heard a rhythmic thunk-thunk and knew that somewhere a woman was pounding millet into meal. A few skinny chickens, displaced by our arrival, resumed their hopeful pecking. A faint, hot breeze bore the pungent-sweet aroma of dust, dung, and woodsmoke, a scent I would forever associate with Africa.

Yacouba returned carrying two tin pots: chicken and sauce in one, rice in the other. We expected him to join us for lunch, but he simply smiled and said, "No, here we honor our guests by allowing them to eat alone."

After lunch, Yacouba enlisted two young men to carry our beds to the large mango tree at the river's edge. Here we would pass the heat of the afternoon, he said. The children gathered around us again, and we showed them postcards of our home in North Carolina. Amadou, a boy of fifteen, was peering at the words on the back of the card when Beba took my hand and indicated that I should follow her. We stopped outside a small hut surrounded by dusty bushes, and a wizened woman with tired eyes emerged from the entrance. Beba introduced me to her mother who gestured for me to sit down on one of the woven blankets on the sand. She ducked her head and disappeared inside her home. I watched a teenaged girl braiding a younger girl's hair. Another young girl of about seven shyly fingered my straight, brown hair and giggled. Who was this *anasara* (white woman) who refused to tuck her hair into a headscarf? Beba's mother returned with a baby on her hip, put a small square of fabric on my skirt, and placed the naked infant on my lap. The baby grasped my finger, looked at me, and cooed. Before Beba walked me back to the mango tree, she gave me a handful of leaves which I tucked into my pocket.

Back at the tree, Lou and Amadou were hunched over a book. Lou was naming the pictures in a coloring book we had brought for the children, and Amadou was busy scribbling the English words into a small notebook. "Teach me!" he kept saying. Although my college English degree hadn't prepared me to teach, I wondered if I could teach English to children like Amadou.

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At twilight, after another solitary meal, we slathered ourselves with insect repellent and noticed a small, wavering light coming closer. It was Yacouba, carrying a kerosene lantern. "This is for you," he said. I asked him why we saw no other lanterns in the village, only the flickering glow of cooking fires.

"The villagers can no longer use their lamps. They have no money to buy oil. I do worry about my family here. When my father, the chief, passes away, I will be responsible for all of them."

As I was getting ready for bed, I reached into my pocket and found the leaves. I tossed them under a bush. The next day I asked Yacouba why Beba had given me those leaves. "Oh," he said, "those are for tea." I was glad I hadn't told him I had thrown them away.

During the next three weeks, Yacouba became a friend. A good friend. We had driven and walked, laughed and sweated our way through hundreds of dusty miles. On our last evening in West Africa, we sipped cups of tea in a restaurant in Côte d'Ivoire. The crisp white tablecloths and flickering candlelight again offered a movie image: *Casablanca*. We reminisced with Yacouba about the places we had visited, like the animist Dogon villages in the Bandiagara Cliffs and the Great Mosque in Djenni, a holy pilgrimage for Yacouba and many other West African Muslims. Without this trip, he said, he probably would never have seen them.

"Oh, no," said Lou, "We are the ones who are grateful. Very few Americans have had the privilege of traveling where you have taken us. Very few have had the honor of knowing someone like you." Although we had already paid him well for his services, we wanted to give Yacouba a gift. After dinner, Lou handed him a fifty-dollar bill and said he should use it as he wished.

"Could you please write a small note?" asked Yacouba. "I will need a letter when I take this to the bank, so they won't think I have stolen the money."

The following morning we sat on the tarmac of the Abidjan airport, waiting for our Air Afrique flight to depart. My mind was still replaying scenes from our three-week adventure. I had only one regret: I had really wanted to brag to my friends back home I had been to Timbuktu. We had been a mere four or five hours' drive from that exotic city whose very name suggests the end of the earth, but Yacouba had said, "I've been there many times, and I always get two or three flat tires on that bad road. Really, there isn't much to see." We hoped that we would see Yacouba again, but nothing is certain in Africa. As he himself would say, "*Enshallah*." God willing.

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The trip was physically demanding, and it had shown me my limitations. I could not live in a mud hut, pee in bushes, and wash my clothes in the river, but I knew that one day I wanted to eat dinners with the villagers. I wanted to bring oil for their lanterns, and respond to Amadou's urgent plea for English lessons. I wanted to be a woman who knew what to do with a handful of leaves.

Chapter 2

You're Going *Where*?

One September evening in 1994 Lou came home from church whistling. Lou never whistled. He unhooked his clerical collar from his shirt, poured himself a glass of iced tea and planted himself next to the kitchen sink, where I was peeling potatoes.

"Susan, I think I've figured out a way for us to go back to Africa for longer than just a few weeks." My husband's predisposition to nonconformity had always been, for me, one of his more endearing qualities. Instead of attending a Lutheran seminary as most pastors in our denomination did, Lou had worked three jobs to acquire his four years of theological training at Yale Divinity School. During his third year, when other seminarians were interning in local parishes, Lou went to Germany to work as a *jugendarbeiter*, a youth worker. Even before we'd gone to Africa, I had begun to sense Lou's restlessness with his 25-year vocation as a parish pastor, his yearning for a different sort of purposeful adventure.

"I've been with this Chapel Hill congregation for eight years, and according to the terms of my call, I'm eligible for a three-month sabbatical. We could go to Africa for those three months."

"Where would we go? What would we do?"

Chicago is the headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the five-million-member church in which Lou was an ordained pastor. I knew our national church had missionaries around the world and had even heard one of them speak a number of years ago, but I was completely ignorant about what modern missionaries did these days. Lou must have read my thoughts. He phoned the church headquarters the following morning, but neither of us expected a quick response. The wheels of ecclesiastical bureaucracy grind slowly. So we were caught off-guard when Harold, the Director for International Personnel, phoned us at home that evening. In a no-nonsense voice he barked, "There's a Lutheran seminary in Namibia that needs lecturers. All the classes are taught in English. Lou, you can teach pastoral counseling and Susan, they want you to teach English. They really want people for six months, but I convinced them to take you. Be ready to go on February 5. We will mail you the tickets, and you can send us a check."

I didn't want to sound like a wimp—after all, this was the person who sent people to remote mission fields all over the world—but I still had pee-in-the-bushes worries. As delicately as I could, I asked about living conditions.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "The village where you'll be living has a nice big house for you, and we can probably find a car for you to use while you're there. Make sure your shots are up to date, and get yourself a three-month prescription for anti-malarial pills."

All the while, I had pretended I knew where Namibia was. The next day I found two guidebooks and a map in a local bookshop, and learned that Namibia was what my seventh-grade geography teacher had called South West Africa, a country twice the size of California with a population of only two million people. Its neighbors were Angola, Botswana, and South Africa. Unlike the tropical climate of West Africa, Namibia is arid, bordered by the Namib Desert in the west and the Kalahari in the east and south. When the country won its war for independence from South Africa in 1990, it had adopted English as its national language.

Our friends, Craig and Glenna, said they'd be happy to let Megan live with them for three months during the spring of her junior year in high school. Jason, who lived in an apartment across town, would take Fuzzy, our cat. We would not be paid, but Lou's church salary would continue. The university allowed me to take a three-month unpaid leave of absence.

The Lutheran Church's Division for Global Mission had had a longstanding relationship with Namibia. Rev. Dan Olson, DGM's Area Program Director for southern Africa, phoned us after Christmas to give us some background and tell us more about Paulinum Seminary, the place where we would be teaching. We were surprised to learn that 75 percent of Namibia's people were Lutheran, a result of the evangelization of the German and Finnish missionaries who went there in the nineteenth century. For many decades the leadership of Namibian Lutheran churches was firmly in the hands of their European mother churches. Over time, this leadership shifted to Namibian pastors, and the need arose for local training of these indigenous pastors. In 1963 Namibian Lutherans of various tribal backgrounds came together and formed this seminary for the training of their pastors.

By the 1980s the seminary had begun accepting women, a relatively rare phenomenon among African Christians. "The school has about 45 students, and they attend for four years," Dan said. "There are several Namibian lecturers and a German woman pastor."

It never occurred to me to worry that I'd never taught English to anyone. I had been an English major in college, and I still remembered how to

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diagram sentences. When Glenna, a high-school German teacher, gave me two of her ESL books, I figured I'd do just fine.

We bought our first laptop computer and a small printer for producing lectures and assignments. Dan had told us that Otjimbingwe, the village where we would be living, had electricity for only twelve hours a day, and we worried about power blips and about whether the country's 220-voltage would damage the laptop. Roger, our computer guru, assured us the laptop's built-in transformer could handle the conversion. Just to be safe, he created a transformer for us. "Once you get there, you will just connect your laptop to this box and then attach the box to a new car battery, and you'll be good to go." The contraption, a metal box with wires and plugs attached to it, looked like a bomb! I still wonder how we got it through customs.

When we arrived at Hosea Kutako Airport in Windhoek, Namibia, we calculated that we had been traveling for about twenty-seven hours, including a five-hour layover in Frankfurt and a shorter one in Johannesburg. Neither of us had slept on those flights. Now, it was mid-afternoon and we were eager to claim our luggage and get settled. Our mysterious metal box cleared customs with a nod and a grunt from the agent. As we walked into the tiny arrivals terminal, I was surprised by how clean everything looked. There were neat rows of orange plastic chairs for people awaiting travelers. Almost everyone was wearing Western-style clothes. This was nothing like the chaotic West African airports we'd known from our two previous visits to the continent. The smell was different, too. Or, rather, there was no smell. From what I remembered of the airports in West Africa, I'd expected dusty wood smoke with a touch of mildew, but the air was clear and dry. Through the doors to the parking lot, I saw a brilliant blue sky above the palm trees.

We had been told that the Namibian bishop would meet our flight, so we looked around for someone resembling a bishop. Taxi drivers kept approaching us, and we waved them away. "No thanks, we're being met." The bishop must have been delayed. Outside, a large bus was filling with passengers for City Centre. While we waited, I exchanged our currency into Namibian dollars. After half an hour, our only companions in the terminal were a few workers in blue jumpsuits, sweeping the floor.

"I'm going to look for a telephone and a phone book," said Lou. "Maybe I can find the number of the church office. You stay here with our luggage."

Twenty minutes later, he returned. "There was no answer when I phoned the church headquarters, but I found the listing for a Lutheran pastor in

Windhoek and phoned him. He said we should take the bus into town, and he'd meet us at the City Centre bus stop and take us to the guesthouse."

We dragged our luggage outside and sat on the curb under a palm tree, sweltering in our winter clothes. We only had to wait half an hour for the bus to arrive, and soon we were on our way into the city, still wondering what had happened to the bishop.

The view from the window of the bus reminded me of our recent trip to New Mexico. The land looked parched and rocky. Waist-high grass and small thirsty thorn bushes lined the highway. In the distance were hazy granite mountains that looked as if they had been guarding this land forever. I remembered reading that although Windhoek was a mile high, it had actually been built in a basin surrounded by the Hochland Mountains. The German colonists had believed the mountains protected them from invasion. Occasionally, we passed what appeared to be a ranch or farmhouse, but I couldn't see any livestock. How different this was from West Africa. For one thing, the road was smooth and wide with very little traffic. For another, no one was hawking wares, either at the airport or along the road. Where were all the vendors? The word that came to mind was desolate, but perhaps that's because we'd been traveling for two days and hadn't been met at the airport. Our two previous trips to this continent had taught me not to become overwhelmed by first impressions. Or underwhelmed.

As we entered the outskirts of the city, the barren land gave way to tidy, adobe-style homes and little shopping centers. The sidewalks were wide and clean; palm trees and brilliant fuchsia bougainvilleas replaced the brush and acacia trees. Neat little signs along the road advertised lodges and hotels for the weary traveler. No longer weary, I pressed my nose against the window. Windhoek could have been any city in Western Europe, with its fashionable shops and well-dressed pedestrians. The driver eased the bus into a tiny parking area on what looked like Windhoek's main street. I glanced across the spacious boulevard at a modern, multi-storied building with a cheerful, sun-shaped sign, the Kalahari Sands Hotel. And here were the vendors. Not pushing and grabbing at us, but sitting quietly on the pavement with their beads, batiks, drums, and carvings neatly arrayed on cheerful red, yellow, and blue ground cloths.

Pastor Frederick was waiting for us when we stepped off the bus. A tall, stern-looking fellow in black clerical garb, he formally shook hands with each of us and shoved our luggage into his tiny car. Lou folded himself into the front seat and I climbed into the back seat. The pastor said the guesthouse was only five minutes away. As he drove, he explained that the guesthouse was

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actually part of the downtown Lutheran church headquarters that included administrative offices, an old stone church, and the bishop's residence. We drove through a gate in the ten-foot-high chain-link fence surrounding a cluster of old, Teutonic-looking buildings and houses. The place looked like an old German missionary compound which, I realized, it probably was. Pastor Frederick went inside a cement block building to find the matron.

He emerged accompanied by a tiny lady in a crisply starched, blue print housedress. "This is Sister Agnes," he said. "Unfortunately, she said she doesn't have a double room, but if you don't mind, she can put you into a single room. Her staff has gone home for the day, so we'll need to help her carry the bedding over there." He nodded toward a block of flats at the edge of the compound that resembled a motel. Lou and the pastor hauled an old iron bed to one of the flats, and I followed with sheets, pillow, and duvet. Sister Agnes stood watching us with her arms crossed. I had the feeling I should be apologizing for being a guest at her guesthouse. When we'd dumped our gear into the flat and thanked Pastor Frederick for his assistance, I asked Agnes if it would be possible for us to have supper in the dining room.

"You do not have a reservation for supper, but maybe I can find enough food for you," she said.

Despite the inauspicious beginning, we tried to remain hopeful and optimistic. The following morning, feeling refreshed and hungry, we made our way to the dining room in a building across a small courtyard from the church administrative offices. Two rows of rectangular tables covered in crisp white tablecloths were set end-to-end. On a heavy, dark wood sideboard were several boxes of cereal, large jugs of milk and juice, a loaf of bread, containers of margarine and marmalade, and a basket of hardboiled eggs. I was crumbling my Weetabix brick into a cereal bowl when a slender, gray-haired man in a deep purple clergy shirt approached our table. His skin was the color of Kraft caramels, and an ornate silver pectoral cross on a heavy silver chain glistened on his chest.

"I am Bishop Diergaardt," he said, a friendly smile crinkling his weathered cheeks.

He apologized profusely for neglecting to meet our flight. "I had written this in my date book, but I suddenly had to conduct a funeral and, uh, I forgot that I needed to go to the airport." Lou assured him that we had managed very well. He didn't mention Sister Agnes.

We spent a week in that Windhoek guesthouse, walking into town and enjoying this capital city that travel writers consider one of the continent's cleanest and prettiest. We peered at the latest fashions in the wide department

store windows, found the banks, ATMs, and coffee shops. I stood in a queue at the main post office and stocked up on overseas airmail stamps. If it weren't for all the African faces and the street vendors selling carvings, drums, and batiks, it would have been easy to forget that this was Africa. A German fellow we'd met at the guesthouse explained that the South Africans, for all the misery they'd caused the Namibians with the imposition of apartheid, had at least left behind a decent infrastructure: roads, bridges, and a good water system. "You can drink water from the tap here, you know."

One morning, we joined several members of the bishop's staff for their mid-morning tea break in a garden area within the compound. A portly fellow with a wide smile and the same caramel-colored skin as the bishop joined the small group at our table. "You must be the Bauers," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Dirk Cloete. The seminary's governing board has just elected me to be principal of Paulinum Seminary for the next three years, and I wanted to be the first to officially welcome you to our faculty."

Dirk showed us the car that DGM had made available to us, a blue, eight-year-old Jetta, and suggested we might want to practice driving it before we left for Otjimbingwe. "I know it takes Americans a little while to get used to driving on the left side of the road."

That afternoon he gave us a tour of the city. In a suburb of Windhoek called Pionierspark, he said, "This is the site of the new seminary. As you can see, they've just broken ground, but we've been promised all the construction will be finished by 1997. When you get to Otjimbingwe, you'll see why it's so important for us to move into town." I wondered what he wasn't telling us.

I told Dirk that his English was excellent. "I studied in Pennsylvania, and received my Master of Divinity from Gettysburg Seminary," he said.

Lou practiced driving around town the following morning, once Windhoek's rush hour had subsided. While Lou drove, I paid attention to the traffic lights, which the locals called "robots." The tricky parts were learning how to shift gears with his left hand and making left-hand turns. More than once, after turning left, Lou would automatically drive into the right lane, and I'd yell, "Get left! Get left!"

We found a supermarket and stocked up on canned goods, cereal, and boxes of milk with a long shelf life. The store had its own bakery, and the favorite item seemed to be small crusty rolls called brochen. The meat department offered an ample array of fresh sausages of every kind. Most of the grocery items on the shelves seemed to be British. I decided not to buy any Marmite, but I did purchase a few jars of Crosse and Blackwell chutney and several packets of cookies. I'd have to remember to call them biscuits. On

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the next aisle I spied a pedestal fan. "Get it!" I said. Even though the climate wasn't humid, as it had been in West Africa, we'd lain awake on sweaty sheets the past few nights. February in Namibia was the middle of summer.

Our next stop was the U.S. Embassy where we needed to register as temporary guest workers. We drove to the residential *Ausspannplatz* neighborhood, just a few blocks from the center of the city. I remembered the grand embassy buildings I'd seen in Washington, D.C., with their marble block construction, tall wrought-iron fences, and immaculate landscaping. By contrast, my country's embassy in Windhoek was a smallish, nondescript structure. If we hadn't seen the American flag, we would have driven right past. No lawn or fence separated the building from the sidewalk. We stepped inside and a laconic Namibian guard at a table shuffled through my handbag before directing us to the consular affairs window. Behind the counter, a friendly, middle-aged Namibian woman in a smart navy blue suit and crisp white blouse made photocopies of our passports and wrote down our contact information. Our final morning errand was a visit to a petrol station where we purchased a car battery for our computer's transformer.

Our week as tourists was over, and it was time to do what we'd come here to do. We sat down in the church courtyard with Dirk and our Namibian map. We needed to know how to find the seminary where we'd be living for the next three months.

"It's about a three-hour drive from here," he said. "I would accompany you, but I need to remain in town for a few more days. You just take the B-1 out of Windhoek. It's a good, tarred road. After about two hours, when you get to Karibib, you'll see the sign for Otjimbingwe. It's next to the turn-off to the Navachab Gold Mine. Follow that gravel road for another hour. You can't miss it. Oh, and be careful when you drive through the rivers. Don't stop halfway through or you're likely to get stuck."

When Dirk had said, "gravel road," I'd expected something like my Chapel Hill driveway: a three-inch layer of grey, pea-sized pebbles. The only substance resembling gravel on that washboard road from Karibib were the boulders that threatened to puncture our tires. I was beginning to believe the entire country was nothing but rocks and mountains. Although Lou never exceeded thirty miles an hour, he struggled to keep the Jetta on a straight course. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. Drops of sweat rolled down his cheek and disappeared into his beard. The smoothest part of the road was the middle, which was fine because there was no other traffic. There weren't even any houses or villages, just parched brown grass and stunted thorn bushes. Had we made a wrong turn somewhere? We saw a small dusty

sign with a wavy blue line. We must be approaching the river. How deep would the water be? How much clearance did this little car have, laden as it was with all our luggage and supplies?

The river turned out to be a twelve-foot-wide strip of deep sand bisecting the road. Lou stopped, chewed his lower lip, backed up, and pushed the gearshift into second gear. "I've driven through sand like this before," he said. "Dirk was right. You can't stop in the middle."

The hot wind was blowing fine grains of sand through the open windows, and I wiped my face with a bandana. Sweat was dribbling down my neck, and the back of my dress was soaked. Even Lou, who always told me he liked hot weather, had big dark circles under his arms. What sort of impression would we make when we finally reached the seminary?

I kept looking for a village like the ones we had seen in West Africa: mud-brick huts with thatched roofs all crowded together. What we saw, instead, was a smattering of tiny tarpaper shacks with corrugated tin roofs. Beyond the shacks was a cream-colored brick church with an ornate white steeple that looked as if it had been transplanted from Bavaria. I recognized it from the picture in the guidebook as the 130-year-old Rhenish Mission Church. We turned right and followed a small sandy car track leading into Otjimbingwe. In the distance, beyond a tall barbed-wire fence, was an assortment of institutional-type buildings, all of them tan with rust-red roofs. This must be the seminary. Little barefooted children came running out of their homes to wave at us. Their mothers, in headscarves and simple, calf-length dresses, stopped hanging laundry on bushes and stared. The few men sitting outside their homes never looked up.

The gate into the campus was open, and when we drove through we saw three large houses ahead of us: solid, single-story, cement block structures with dark green tiled roofs and sturdy wood doors. Maybe one of them was ours? We saw no one walking around, so we stopped in front of the house that seemed the most lived-in: laundry on the clothesline, a flower garden in the front, and patches of tousled corn and healthy tomato plants in a side garden. We knocked on the front door. The gentleman who answered was tall and slender, very dark skinned, with a neat white beard. He smiled broadly, grasped our hands, and told us his name was Tomas Shivute.

"Welcome to Paulinum! You must be Lou and Susan. We are so very glad that you are here." He peered more closely at Lou and the two men laughed. They looked like negative and positive images of each other.

"I think I have just met my African double," said Lou.

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Tomas produced a set of keys, and pointed to one of the large houses we had passed. "That one is yours for the next three months. Please feel at home. There isn't anyone else on campus now except my family and the treasurer, but the students and other faculty members will be arriving in a few days. My wife teaches primary school here in the village, so we live here year-round. What else can I do to help you feel at home?"

"Can we drink the tap water here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. The water is safe to drink."

"And what about electricity?" asked Lou. "We were told there is only electricity for twelve hours a day."

Tomas smiled widely, "You are in luck! As of last month, Otjimbingwe now has electricity twenty-four hours a day."

As tired as we felt from the long, hot drive, we were eager to set up housekeeping in our new home. The house was more spacious than I had expected, and with its thick, white plaster walls and tall ceilings, it felt twenty degrees cooler than the outside temperature. There were plenty of kitchen cupboards and drawers. When I pulled out one of the drawers, an enormous cockroach scurried down the side of the cupboard and disappeared under the baseboard. I swallowed hard, determined not to be a wimp, and rooted around in our plastic shopping bags for the green and yellow can of Doom insecticide. I was pleased I'd remembered to bring plenty of plastic zip-lock bags for our dishes, cutlery, and food. There was no stove, only a two-burner hotplate, but since DGM had negotiated with the seminary for us to eat lunch and dinner in the seminary's dining hall, I wouldn't be doing very much cooking. The tiny, half-sized refrigerator would be adequate.

The living room was spacious, but sparsely furnished with two faded blue upholstered chairs and two long wooden tables. There was no carpet on the brown linoleum floor, and no pictures on the walls other than a Bless This House needlepoint sampler. The air felt thick, so I pushed aside the heavy curtains opened the windows. Lou was already assembling the pedestal fan. We carried one of the tables to the far end of the room, and set it down in front of a window that opened onto the screened porch. There was plenty of room for two chairs at that table, and we set up the computer, printer, car battery, and the transformer box. This would be our workstation.

The house had three bedrooms, and the queen-sized bed in the largest one was made up with crisply ironed sheets and a blue-flowered duvet. The two wardrobes would easily accommodate our clothes. I had to swallow hard when I saw the bathroom. Squares of gray, powdery grout revealed where tiles were missing from the walls and floor. The sink was cracked and

chipped, and the bathtub was stained with streaks of greenish mineral deposits. Next to the sink, a tiny shower emitted a pitiful dribble when I turned on the faucet. That first evening we discovered there was no hot water, even though we'd seen a hot water tank outside the house. The next week, when we asked a colleague whether it worked, she told us no one's geyser (she pronounced it, "geezer") worked. We discovered that if we wanted a warm shower, my preference for hair washing, we would have to shower in the late afternoon, after the water in the outside pipes had absorbed the heat of the day.

While we waited for the students to arrive, we put together what we hoped were acceptable lesson plans. In the evenings, when the heat of the day abated, we strolled around the dusty grounds of the campus. We peered through the windows of the tiny administrative office and adjoining library. One evening, Tomas joined us.

"We only see two classrooms," Lou remarked.

"Yes, because of our space limitations, Paulinum only accepts new students every other year. The students who will arrive in a few days are P-two's and P-four's, second- and fourth-year students. The seminary used to train deacons and elders, as well as students studying for the ordained ministry. We don't do that anymore, but somehow the 'P' designation remained for our pastoral students. Let's walk over to the volleyball court." As we approached a sandy field on the edge of the campus, Tomas continued, "We have classes from eight o'clock to one o'clock each day. The students remain in those two classrooms you saw and their lecturers come to them. We have a half-hour tea break in the middle of the morning, and dinner is served in the dining hall at one o'clock. I think you will be eating your meals in the dining hall, right?"

We nodded.

"Are there afternoon or evening classes?" asked Lou.

"No, it's too hot. Everyone rests in the afternoons." He laughed. "When I was in Finland--that's where I studied for my doctoral degree--I was surprised that we had afternoon classes and evening seminars there. Even though it wasn't hot, I had a difficult time staying awake." He explained the daily chapel service schedule. "We have morning devotions at seven-thirty on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. There is a vespers service on Wednesday evenings and a service of compline on Saturday evenings. Our Sunday morning services are at nine o'clock."

Our walking tour had brought us to the front of the chapel. Adjacent to this small, attractive, sand-colored church was a tall, white bell tower with an

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intricate depiction of Jesus and his disciples painted onto one side. Tomas reached in his pocket for a ring of keys and opened the front door. The pulpit, lectern, and communion rail were constructed of sturdy blond wood, polished to a lustrous glow. The whitewashed walls gleamed. A ruby-red carpet runner covered the wide center aisle. It was apparent that a lot of foreign donor money had been poured into this chapel. As if reading my thoughts, Tomas said, "Our German friends helped us build this chapel. It's quite nice, isn't it?"

On our way back to our houses, a tall, robust man wearing a bright yellow shirt and knife-creased brown trousers emerged from a door next to one of the classrooms. He and Tomas embraced one another in one of those triple, European hugs, and the man said, "Comrade!" Tomas introduced us to his good friend, Matheus Hashoongo. "Matheus is the treasurer of our seminary. He has been with us for five years, since the end of The Struggle."

Matheus shook hands with Lou and me, bowing slightly from the waist. "You are most welcome here," he said in a deep voice. "Please feel at home."

"My friend was a freedom fighter during Namibia's long war for independence," said Tomas. "He has many diplomas in accounting and business. We are fortunate he has joined us here."

During the next few days, our faculty colleagues began arriving. We met Rev. Eino Amaambo, an elderly gentleman who taught Greek and pastoral counseling courses. He told us his wife, Esther, was living in their home in the north, tending their crops and taking care of the relatives who lived on their homestead. Rev. Michael Shangala was the next to arrive, a slender young man who appeared to be in his early forties. His wife, Lucia, was a nurse in Windhoek and lived there with the couple's two children. Eino and Michael had both studied at a Lutheran seminary in Minneapolis.

Rev. Angela Veii, a friendly, energetic woman with short, blonde hair, was a German pastor in her forties who lived in the house next to ours. Angela said she had been teaching at Paulinum for three years. She was married to Gerson, a Namibian who had his own small construction company in Windhoek. We were learning that it wasn't uncommon for married couples to live apart. In this country where unemployment was 40 percent, a person couldn't leave her job just because her husband might have a good position somewhere else in the country. We were surprised that Dirk had not yet appeared on campus, and assumed his Windhoek meetings had delayed his departure.

Mail was only collected once a week, whenever someone took the big canvas mail pouch to the post office in Karibib. We discovered that phone

service was basically nonexistent. Matheus said if we wanted to make a phone call, we could phone the operator in Karibib and give her the phone number of our party. She would seek an open line, and call us back. "Sometimes that can take three or four hours," he said. Since we didn't know anyone in Namibia and never expected to make any transatlantic phone calls, that didn't seem to be a problem for us.

The dining hall was not yet open for meals and we were growing tired of canned spaghetti and tins of tuna fish. Our supply of Nescafé instant coffee was almost gone, and the tiny shop in the village sold little more than fresh bread, jam, lots of tinned sardines (pilchards) and soda—what the Namibians call cool drinks. We decided to drive the washboard road back to Karibib for supplies and offered to collect the mail. Matheus gave us the key for the mail pouch.

After less than a week in Otjimbingwe, driving into Karibib felt like reentering civilization. We stopped at the Caltex petrol station and remembered to tip the service station attendant who filled the tank. Next door to the service station, we stocked up on groceries at the little supermarket. Lou found a small styrofoam ice chest on a dusty shelf at the back of the market, and we filled it with a bag of ice, Cadbury chocolate bars, and three packages of hard cheese. We were preparing ourselves for the long, hot drive back to the village when we discovered a little Bavarian-style coffee shop. The return trip could wait while we enjoyed fresh filter coffee in china cups and gooey cream-filled pastries. That's when we decided to make this teeth-rattling drive into Karibib part of our weekly routine.

The students had begun to arrive, and so had Dirk. We were eager to start teaching, and Lou asked Dirk about the class schedule when we met him on campus. "Oh, sorry. I meant to tell you. The lecturers will be meeting in the library tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. That's when we will decide who teaches which course, and we'll set up the class timetable."

Lou glanced at me and raised his eyebrows. The faculty didn't know which classes they would be teaching?

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