



CHAPTER 3

The Acropole Hotel

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It was an unusual feeling, sitting in an airport in Hong Kong and having experiences from ‘another lifetime’ float across the back of my mind. I had bought a book by the celebrated travel writer, Paul Theroux, about his trip from Cairo to Cape Town. I was not especially committed to reading about Africa at the time, but when I had seen the book in a Dymocks bookstore in Hong Kong, it drew me to itself, as books can do.

As I followed Theroux on his journey across the pages, I had decided that, pyramids notwithstanding, Egypt was a place I did not want to visit. The more he related about his time there, the more appreciative I was of the fact that I could read about it and not have to experience it. His journey continued until, eventually, he crossed the border into Sudan. I was still reading as a detached observer, glad that the experiences were his, and that I could enjoy them (if that is the word) from the comfort of an air-conditioned airport lounge.

It was then, in Theroux’s Sudan, that I began reading words like, “the Acropole Hotel in Khartoum” and of its Greek owner. He wrote of how the Acropole hotel was the relatively safe focal point for foreign journalists working in the country, and of the owner’s “uncanny ability to get things done.” Theroux mentioned driving “across the desert to the town of Shendi.” He wrote of the town of Omdurman. And I was

transported, my mind beginning to fill with that semi-delicious, semi-menacing feeling of long-buried emotions struggling their way to the surface. Had it been it twenty-odd years before, or another lifetime?

Despite all the family jokes we make about my trip to Africa, it did make a significant contribution to who I am. My task, all those years ago, was simply to accompany an Australian TV personality into some of the worst, most famine-ridden parts of Africa, and to write a script for him on the run. He was to be the presenter of a documentary on famine relief, a fundraiser for a charity working in those regions. I was his writer. In his biography, the late Bobby Limb mentioned the trip. It obviously left as much of an impression upon him as it did upon me.

It was a trip of unresolvable incongruities, one in which the paradoxes of this fallen world were brought into more stark relief for me than at any other time in my life. Awful at the time, but with the memories refreshed by Theroux's book, I realised it was one of those precious gifts of my Father, an enormous education crammed into a few weeks.

On the one hand, it was a privilege to read the Scriptures and pray with Bobby Limb (one of the better-known TV personalities of my generation). He was a brand-new believer at the time. He spoke of how he had teetered on the edge of a relationship with God for many years and had only recently stepped over the line.

That had happened shortly before our trip to Africa. So, apart from the task we were there to perform, I think we were there for each other. We read the Psalms together, we spoke of the need for caution in becoming a "Christian celebrity" before he had had a time to grow and really learn of Christ. But more than that, we shared some depths of human experience that I have not shared with any other human being. Bob and I rarely put into words the nature of the experience on occasions when we met afterwards, but we *knew*, if you get my drift.

The name Khartoum is probably one of those magical place names that evokes all sorts of mysterious images in the mind. I had heard of Khartoum, had probably read something about it in a novel somewhere, but would not really have known it as the capital of Sudan. But then, I

was neither a widely travelled, nor widely read Aussie. So, for me, being in Khartoum was to be in another world, a city from antiquity, set at the confluence of the Blue and White Nile rivers. It is at Khartoum that these two rivers join in a surging tangle of water, combining their efforts for a final northward assault on Cairo.

The rivers were flowing. I had never seen them before, but to me, they looked full and healthy, as rivers go. But just beyond them, a handful of kilometres out into the countryside, the images of those bubbling, boiling waters were lost in a sea of sand and tears. It had not rained in some distant parts of the Sudan for seven years. Desperate people had headed for the city, but the political regime refused to allow them access. They were dying, scorched by the sun and the political regime that would not lift its hand to help them.

With the film crew, Bob and I stood among the flapping scraps of material, or a few torn pieces of plastic stretched across a stick or two, that were the last shelter for these bush people in a blistering wilderness of stones and sand. Hundreds of small family groups huddled in the midst of nothing, sheltered by next to nothing. Those flapping scraps of material were nothing but flags marking the spot where death would come. They were a burial shroud, given in advance, as if to make the process more painfully slow.

I stood with a cameraman, a director, a sound man, and a celebrity. We were all there to perform a task, but at times were unable to because of the tears. I had never watched children die before. Like many other Australians, I had watched such scenes on television, across the rim of a coffee cup. I had muttered expressions of horror as I gazed at flickering scenes of slow, famine-induced death, sanitised by the glass of the TV screen. I remained untouched by the heat and smells. When the ads came on, I was able to dash to the kitchen to open a packet of biscuits and be back in time for the next news item. But here, now, twenty odd kilometres into the desert beyond Khartoum in Sudan, the faces I had seen on TV had become real mothers with real children. They were in the real pain of death by exposure and starvation.

I recall Bob walking towards the camera, as I held up the script-board I had written. He stopped, unable to speak. I could only just see him because my eyes were literally running with tears. The director put his arm around me and asked if I was OK. I might have asked it of him, for his emotions were as evident as mine. The cameraman had only recently shot the Mad Max film, but that was all make-believe. Here the death was real.

We would begin to film again, and a wail would go up from a desolate clump of humanity a few metres away. Another mother would be holding a limp bundle of rags. Death had come. We walked between rows of eyes that betrayed an emotional numbness. These eyes had gone beyond bewilderment, beyond anger, beyond hope, and into the void of resignation.

At the end of the day, we drove back into the city of Khartoum for a meeting with some senior aid agency executives and semi-government officials. We climbed out of the Land Rover, shook the dust of death off our clothes, and walked into the foyer of the Hilton Hotel. It was wonderfully cool, all polished and clean. There were groups of aid agency workers standing around with long, cool glasses in their hands. Dare I use the words “Happy Hour”? I had a Coke. On reflection, it was the worst Coca-Cola I have ever had. It looked like an ordinary Coke but tasted of irreconcilable incongruity. Of oppression and death.

So, I went across town and stayed at the Acropole Hotel. I have nothing against five-star hotels. They do a great job. But there is a time and place for everything. In Khartoum, with the wail of death still in my ears, it just did not seem to be the time or place.

As I continued to read, I was drawn into the buried memory of driving across the desert from Khartoum to reach the town of Shendi. Another flicker of the past stimulated by Theroux’s words. It was a remarkable journey. We set off in the back of a truck, with bench seats along each side, a canvas covering, and no sides. The truck, or desert bus, as it was called by the drivers, headed out into the desert, a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree expanse of nothing, a flatness at times totally unrelieved even by

a single tree or shrub. By six in the morning, it was already approaching 50 degrees Celsius. How the driver knew the way through those trackless wastes remains one of life's unsolved mysteries to me. There wasn't even a well-worn rut to follow.

As we lay back in the oppressive heat, with images of death still in our minds, and more to come, one of the film crew passed me a set of headphones and a portable CD player. There, for a few moments, I listened to a magnificent recording of Verdi's Requiem. Wave upon wave of some of the world's most beautiful choral music filled my mind. Sounds of coolness, cathedrals, and moist medieval crypts. I was listening to some of the very best that cultured humanity had to offer, while gazing out through the burning heat at rainless skies that seemed to have allied themselves to a political regime intent upon wiping out a generation. Every so often, in the distance, we could see rags flapping on poles, and knew we were gazing at death.

In Shendi, we stayed in a hotel that cost around twenty cents USD per night—per person, that is. The rooms were open spaces, enclosed by mud walls, and covered by a ceiling whose greatest claim to fame seemed to be that it was still up there. It was oppressively hot. We decided to sleep outside in the courtyard. We carried our beds through the hole in the wall that was probably inspired by the architectural concept of the window.

During the night, a sandstorm came up, and as we were dragged out of fitful sleep by the early morning Islamic call to prayer, we looked for all the world like children who had half buried themselves in sand just for fun. A wash, sort of. Some breakfast, sort of. A meeting or two, some filming, and we were off again, back towards Khartoum. This time, we were to be driven in an air-conditioned Land Rover belonging to an aid agency. We had all the brilliance of technology working for us. We had taken care of the heat with air-conditioning. We had taken care of the rough terrain with good suspension. We had kept out the blistering winds with glass and steel. But the desert always wins.

The sandstorm freshened. After driving for several hours, we realised

that we were hopelessly lost. At the best of times, the desert looks trackless; in a sandstorm, every familiarity disappears. Even the comfort of distance disappears. The whole world is reduced to a room just a few metres square, constructed of moving sandpaper. For all our technology and modernity, we were as near to death by heat and thirst as the desert was pleased to bring us. Each of us thought, but none of said, “We’re going to die.”

The desert did let us go, preferring just to warn us this time. Miraculously, (truly miraculously!) we found our way back to Shendi, and as the storm abated, we once again committed ourselves into the hands of the desert bus drivers. With no compass, no map, and no technology, our driver just headed out into the nothingness. Untold hours later, we reached Khartoum, suitably amazed and, for the briefest of periods, with our western technological superiority suitably humbled. `

Were we meant to experience just the smallest of brushes with death? Perhaps a tiny encounter with the emotions of those around us we had come to film? I am not sure. But I do know that twenty years later I am sitting in an airport lounge, having just eaten too much of the free food and coffee. I survived. However, it would probably not be an exaggeration to say that every pair of eyes into which I gazed on that trip, every pleading, longing face, is now little more than white calcium buried somewhere amidst the sands and rocks of the forbidden countryside.

The drought was bad. The real genocide, however, came not from nature but from human nature. It emanated from the heart of fallen human beings who used the natural processes to further their desired ethnic cleansing. That was the reality. Where was God in all this? Where He always is, accessible to the tiniest whisper of faith but absent from the hearts of those who used the drought as a weapon. His world is as broken as was His heart broken on the cross.

What the drought did not kill, more blatantly aggressive politics have, as twenty years of civil war have raged in the south of the country. Men and women, weary of life and afraid of death, struggle against the madness of fallen humanity. A well-trained nomadic instinct can enable

a bus driver to plot an accurate course through desert sands that change with the wind. Plotting a course through the barbarity of political leaders, spurred on by tribal and religious hatred, is far more difficult.

I still have a photo of the Acropole Hotel somewhere. It might even be a post card. However, the strongest memory is not that remarkably resilient haven of intrigue in Khartoum, nor is it the “Happy Hour” spent among aid workers while the world rotted around us. The strongest memory is the flapping pieces of material that refused to shelter families from death.

Even now, when I see a piece of material flapping in the breeze, I occasionally still find I am transported in my mind back to that other lifetime. The cries of grieving mothers are the same in any language; just as penetrating, and just as long-lived in the mind.

Sudan was just another experience along the way, albeit one that has stayed with me, buried quite deeply into my psyche. What I learned through that experience was the bewilderment of paradox, the perplexity of irreconcilable incongruities. You see, I was paid well for doing what I did. It was a wonderful gift of God to us as a family. Some years before, I had given up all earning of income in order to focus more directly on a life of Bible teaching. As a family, we had no income, yet through that unsought for trip, God provided enough for us to buy the family car we needed. We rode around in it for years, air-conditioned and all. I also gained an increasing measure of credibility through what I had written. Many years of clients and income followed, enough to enable me to pursue pastoral work and mission work, mostly at no charge to those for whom I have worked.

And yet the people died. They died while I was there. They died while I drank my Coke at the Hilton. They died while I listened to Verdi’s Requiem. They died as I left on a clean, cool, taste-of-home-friendly Qantas 747 from Harare airport in Zimbabwe. Perhaps, because of what I wrote, and what was seen on TV, some more people lived than might have done so otherwise. Maybe. But the heart of Man is such that so little of what we see on television will really change the situation.

And so, the perplexity of paradox. Could we ever write a formula that would explain how their death improved my economic wellbeing? Could we ever write a sentence to resolve that incongruity? It is simply the way life works in a terribly fallen, terribly broken world.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Romans 8:19-24.

“Come Lord Jesus.” Revelation 22:20