

IT HAD BEEN one hell of a day, and it showed every sign of deteriorating still further. What a way to spend Christmas. I wished I was back in the air-conditioned comfort of the 'International' or, even better, the primitive relaxations of my scruffy flat back in London. Instead, here I was in the African bush, hot and distinctly bothered. In fifteen years as an itinerant journalist, winging vulture-like the carrion corners of the world, I had grown calloused to misery and suffering, and plenty of the red stuff. But I'm something of a coward, and I've never succeeded in getting used to being shot at, the idea that someone out there is actually trying to kill me, to use his shiny new North Korean AK47 to fill me full of holes in the wrong places.

All of which goes some way to explaining why that morning I'd been glad to put on the white freshly-laundered safari suit that the houseboy had brought in: no one could mistake me for a soldier in this get up. They might even take me for a priest or a doctor—though there wasn't much healing for mind or body in my acid pen. I'd looked the picture of the foreign correspondent at breakfast on the stoep, as we looked out over the rich farming land, the long reaches of irrigated wheat and maize, and in the distance, the blue hills and the border which here to the whites meant the 'ters' (I preferred the more neutral 'guerrillas') and their bases, their Cuban allies and instructors, and all the horrors of Marxism and terrorism flooding south side by side. A peaceful scene, beyond the high security fence and the floodlights that had lit it up through the long night hours.

None of us had slept well. The 'agricalert' had sounded twice during the night as neighbours informed us and the security forces that they were being 'reved'. There'd been no casualties, but we'd heard the rockets and small arms fire blasting our neighbours over the hill. I'd thought again about my decision, rashly taken in my infancy at this game, never to carry a gun. Unfortunately, I didn't carry a neon sign either, announcing to all the world that I was neutral, a non-combatant, a foreigner, a journalist. The last was of doubtful worth with the government forces, since they

blamed the like of me for the climate of world opinion against them, and some of the men I'd met made no secret of the fact that they would dearly love to 'slot' me, or 'blow me away', along with all other 'damn liberals'. The bitter blacks out there weren't the only ones to look out for.

My hostess had looked grey with strain, and was very visibly in the final stages of pregnancy. We'd be taking her into town today, and none too soon, but she hadn't wanted to leave her husband. An Israeli-made Uzi sub-machinegun was slung over her shoulder, as casual and as permanent a part of her life as a hand bag.

It is a constant source of amazement to me in my travels what people can learn to live with, and here was a case in point. What makes a young newly-married couple stick this mad life in an armed camp, with little touch with their own kind except over the radio, or at church on Sundays. And to think of raising a family in such an environment. Sure it had been a life of some ease before the war—hard work, but servants, two cars, a pool. Now it was a life of constant danger and tension.

Not a hundred yards beyond the gate we hit the land mine. Not much given to unselfish impulses, I was surprised to find my first thought was, 'Christ, the baby,' as the vehicle inelegantly took to the air, turned a lazy loop and rolled till we hit a gum tree. Our stunned ears absorbed the shock of the detonation. The dust slowly settled. An elegantly crested whoopoo regarded us quizzically through the armoured glass windscreen, as we hung upside down.

'I'm all right darling,' she said. 'Thank God we invested in the monster.' Thank God indeed. The monster, like something out of a science fiction movie, was now definitely the worse for wear, but the angled armour plates over the wheels had deflected a good deal of the blast, the reinforced roll bars had allowed us on landing to skittle harmlessly into the trees, and the safety belts held us safely if uncomfortably in suspended animation.

The side door had been jammed by the blast, but we were able to crawl out of the rear door. We were as

gentle as we could be with her, and in good anglo-saxon style, we were all very brave, and none of us expressed our fears for fear of upsetting the others. The terrified houseboy met us at the gate, and helped us to carry his mistress back to the house. The phone was dead, cut the night before? And the agricultural radio had chosen this moment to go on the blink. But surely, someone would have heard the blast. Someone would come to investigate.

We put her to bed, fortified her with tea, and ourselves with strong double whiskys. I felt very weak and sick. My knees knocked, my hands shook, as the shock hit me. It might have been the last Christmas Eve ever, for me at least. They could have been waiting there to shoot us as we came out of the wreck, or could have blasted us with a rocket.

Lunch came and went. No visitors, and no communication with the outside world. We didn't have much of an appetite, and the cook didn't seem any too keen to tempt us. We nibbled together in their room. In a tight voice she said, 'I don't think we can wait.' I could wait for ever, but I couldn't really say so. They'd have to decide, and one of those pleasant calculations that a computer could take all night on it was. The land rover had roll bars but little armour. If we hit another mine further down the road, the chances were we wouldn't waltz away. And none of that armoured glass and corrugated steel to deflect away the bullets. No, I'd rather stay. But then, in all my adventures, and I could tell many a fine tale to an admiring wench, I'd never delivered a baby. My mind flew back to all those tense film scenes we've all seen: the pretty, efficient nurses, the clipped commands of the doctors. Perhaps after all, her desire for a real doctor made some sense.

Well, we went. I and my white safari suit had soon wilted further in the afternoon sun and the dust. But I felt for her, in the middle, as we went over every bump in that damn road. The chances of another mine before we passed the wreck of the monster were pretty slim, but already my eyes were straining to see any slight disturbance in the dust, any interruption in the vehicle tracks. After the wreck of course the odds against us increased—there's usually another mine

and/or an ambush to catch the sixth cavalry as they charge to the rescue. It wasn't a nice feeling at all.

In unreal calm the bush stretched out around us, the rocky road ahead and a dusty smoke-trail behind. We couldn't really talk over the roar of the engine, just the occasional shouted, 'All right?' and answering nod. Do you know, I found myself praying? 'Please, not just now, not before the next bend... not before the next hill... just a little further.' And whether you try to or not, you start caring for a very pregnant woman when she's jammed up against you in a land rover that may be blown to hell—or wherever land rovers go—any minute. I felt tempted to start on one of my philosophical wanderings. Why do men hate each other, go to such lengths to kill and destroy? Could our arts of living on earth ever catch up with our arts of dispatching people summarily from it? Don't blame me too much if I seem cynical—you might well be too, if you'd seen too many wars, too many brand new leaders going the same sad way as their predecessors. But I am wandering.

The FN rifle in my arms, sticking out the side, no longer felt strange. I suppose I was getting involved, being dragged away from the studied role of the blameless critic with the Olympian view of everyone else's shortcomings and mistakes. I might even kill to protect this unborn baby stirring beside me, though till now I would have denied that it had a life to save. But of course I knew that there could be no solution in the simplistic answers of the gun: that much I'd preached often enough.

I was just beginning to dream of an ice-cold beer when we came to the blown bridge. I could just see that beer bottle in the sky, bubbles rising to the top, condensation trickling down the outside. Then there was just a hole where the road should have been. It wasn't that the donga was all that deep, and there was no water in the bottom, but it was clear: no bridge, no crossing. The same gang's work, we guessed. They were dangerously talented—many gangs could be relied on to place a massive charge in the wrong place and leave the flimsiest bridge intact. They didn't look like the boys to blaze away from ambush, lacerating

the trees and disturbing the birds, but leaving their target unhit. Still, no shots came as we cautiously got out of the truck and inspected the ruins. Without one of those patent bridge-laying machines we were in trouble, and I didn't carry an inflatable one in my case. It was getting late. Late to be on the roads at any rate. And I didn't fancy spending the night out here in this hostile silence, even if the fourth member of our party could delay his arrival.

The only way out appeared to be to go back a couple of ks, and then off down a side road that would at least take us to the doubtful protection and help of a PV, a protected village, with its keep, its white District Officer and his handful of semi-trained, semi-armed assistants. At least they would have a radio, and with a lot of luck, we might get a chopper: neither a pregnant mum nor a foreign correspondent would carry a high priority, but perhaps together?...

It was a dry and dusty scene as we moved into the TTL (Tribal Trust Land). Poorer soils, I suppose, and poor subsistence-farming techniques, coupled with over-grazing and cutting the trees for firewood. But the bush has an amazing ability to produce new life, even in the dry. Months before the rains, the unimpressive little trees start to sprout new leaves, brown and olive, maturing to green, fresh, new and clean. There should have been clusters of simple huts, kraals, scattered across the landscape, but there were now only scorched patches that might have marked someone's home.

I was driving, sweat pouring down my face, sticking me to the seat, despite the wind due to the lack of doors on either side, and despite the unaccustomed space. He was riding in the back now, beside his wife, who was stretched out on the pile of mattresses the two of us had put in, just in case. She was a tough one—but then there weren't many cream puffs out here at the sharp end. There was a strength in these pioneering folk I had to admire.

No more mines, no more ambushes, so we arrived safely. The last villagers were being checked in through the gate. Curfew time—which meant that anything moving outside now became free game for the security

forces, waiting tensely in their ambushes, hunched over their guns.

The DO wasn't much help. He hid himself in his fortified bunker and fortified himself with booze. I couldn't really blame him, but I'd hoped for better. Still, he did provide us with the ice-cold beers I'd been dreaming of, and he had got a radio set that worked. No joy there. It was too late to drive on, too late to send a doctor out by road, and no, there weren't any choppers free, didn't we know there was a war on. They had better things to do than running a maternity service—like killing.

The DO stoked up a bit more as the farmer and I explained the situation. The chances were we were going to have to deliver the child there and then. One down with the bottle, the other down with nerves: I could just see myself doing this on my own. Perhaps a touch more of those self-interested 'prayers' that hadn't let me down thus far?

The pains seemed to be getting worse. I got him holding her hand, stroking her hair, telling her it would be all right. I felt better listening to him, I could almost believe him—till I remembered I was the doctor, and my memories of *Dr Kildare* and *Emergency Ward Ten* were all too dim.

You know, I really did care. I was jealous of that farmer having someone to love, a hand to hold, a woman to reassure, jealous of the worry lining his face, the responsibilities bowing his shoulders. After all, women have been producing babies for centuries, I tried to encourage myself. There must be something, well, natural about it all. But I knew I was way out of my depth. I didn't have a clue. I'd mucked around in death for years, but here, I, me, I had a life in my hands. Two rather.

I felt really rather desperate, stuck there in that damn sweaty little hole, in the African bush, guarded by ten old men with .303s, and a long night ahead. My safari suit was a mess, far from the starched white doctor's kit of the morning, half a century before.

Now I've heard stories of the bush telegraph and jungle tomtoms round the world, and as a mass consumer of rumours myself, I'd had too much first-

hand experience to sneer. But its efficiency was never more welcome. We got us a doctor. Well, not perhaps the real thing, though not far off. You'd have sworn we were miles from the nearest help there, surrounded by 'ters'. But then, none of us had been counting on miracles, even if we believed in them. which I definitely didn't.

He had left the university after four years of medicine, to join 'the boys in the bush', and he'd survived a gruelling apprenticeship of 12 months in the camps outside and an amazing 18 months inside the country, always on the move, always hunted. A crazy gesture really. Damn near cost him his life. He'd heard about our need, wouldn't say how, and presented himself at the gate. It came out later that his section and another had been going to hit the PV that night. Their informant inside had told them of our arrival—and our need. He'd persuaded the section commander and the commissar this would make a good publicity coup, with me there. I know it sounds crazy.

He stood there in the lights, while the nervous guards covered him from the shadows, and I tried to persuade the sloshed DO not to shoot the blank blank on the spot, but to let him in. I can be quite forceful when I lose my temper. You can get a lot of experience in my business brow-beating officialdom, for plane tickets, visas, permission to visit sensitive areas. I needed it all, but he retired for the night with another bottle.

The doc had a heavy, complete-looking communist-made tool kit, and he looked as if he knew how to use it. The guards all thought it was some kind of trick. They didn't exactly quarrel, but if anything started, I didn't give too much for my own life-expectancy. With one of them looking on, we got down to business. It can be very reassuring to be told what to do.

In the later stages, a rather sick-looking DO looked in, surprisingly sober. He said he couldn't sleep, not just the danger, but nothing like this had ever happened in his 'office' before. He almost apologised for not being more help, after all, he'd helped to deliver women in the PV before, but they'd always had a local midwife to do most of the work.

It was after four before the little blighter took his first look around the world and sensibly started to howl. 'Happy Christmas,' said the doc. And it was. Not like the usual pie celebrations, or my libertine orgies. But it was a happy Christmas. 'Thank you,' said the father, rather stiffly, 'I'll never forget this.' But he meant it. He had that tight way of talking we Anglo-Saxons use when we're close to tears. Then wryly smiling, 'A few hours ago we would have been trying to kill each other.'

There wasn't a lot more, and what there was, well, words elude me—and that doesn't happen often. We talked together as men. Outside, quietly, under the stars, while the mother and child slept inside the bunker. The boozy DO, the father, the guerrilla medic and I. About what had made us the way we were, and what we wanted to see for the future.

We got a chopper out next day.

It all came back to me when I sat down to write my Christmas 'sermon'. And no, I didn't go into holy orders. There just isn't a priest round here, and the other correspondents know that Christmas means a lot to me. They're a pretty hard-bitten lot, but they're human too, beneath all the armour plating. And they'd like to be home with their families instead of in the middle of another war, so they asked me to say something, before we sing a few carols, rockets permitting, round the bar. Two of our fearless band got killed the other day—that may have something to do with it too. It's always a shock to be reminded that we are not indestructible or immortal.

I don't know what happened to the others in the story, though I sometimes think of them. I like to think of the doc as a great minister of health in the making—if he makes it. That dratted woman, as we parted, and after she had thanked me for all I'd done, and asked me to be Godfather to her little son which I refused, she said, 'You've got a heart, if only you could learn to use it.' Just like that, without any warning, out of the blue, she let me have it, right between the eyes.

Well, it's never been the same since. And there are some who say that I'm not the same, and who regret it. But I don't.

Odd, isn't it?