

Drastic Measures

The early morning sun had just cleared the horizon and poked its wintery nose around the edges of the Beit Bridge border post building when we arrived at the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa on the Limpopo River on June 4th, 1994.

The cars waiting in line to be searched were loaded to the hilt both inside and out with personal goods. Sofas, chairs, tables, bicycles, wheelbarrows and suitcases straddled each car roof. Strapped together, several feet high and precariously angled.

With a 580 km journey to Harare ahead and a 50th birthday luncheon to attend at 12 noon, arriving at the border when it opened at 7.00 a.m. no longer seemed sufficient time to get through the formalities before heading north. It looked as though there was no earthly way that we would move more than a few feet in four hours unless we took drastic steps.

While I waited in line, with my children, my husband took the drastic steps.

"Excuse me please, excuse me. Coming through because I have to be in Harare by noon. Excuse me please." he said and they gave way and parted for him like the Red Sea did for the Israelites.

Then he hit his first snag. The man at the window he had headed for shook his head.

"No sir, I cannot accept you. I saw what you did. You pushed your way in front of all these people."

"I didn't push." my husband said. "They let me through."

"I'm not serving you sir. Go to the back of the line."

"Awh!" the crowd booed the immigration officer and they pointed to the window next to him.

Encouraged, my husband moved across to the window to the right of the man and the woman there laughed at my husband's audacity as those in line chanted. With the black ink entry stamps slapped into our passports, the crowds clapped and cheered and once again parted so that my husband could get out and he thanked them for allowing him through.

Maneuvering our car from the line required patience but we were able to get it searched and hit the long almost straight road to Harare by 8.00 a.m.

I kept my eye on the road and the surrounding flat land that stretched for miles on

either side of the road rather than the odometer needle, which on many occasions, my son excitedly informed me, touched the 200 km mark. When my husband slowed the car down to an average of 160 it felt as though we were crawling.

A few times the wind-swell, from Mercedes' speed, made the bicycle riders on the dirt shoulder of the road, with their 50lb fabric bags of mielie-meal slung across the handle bars, wobble and threaten to careen into a ditch.

It was Saturday and obviously supermarket day because along certain parts of the dirt track on the side of the road were local people, either riding bicycles or walking home with sacks of meal on their heads or inside wheelbarrows. It appeared that wheelbarrows were a preferred means of transport for their sacks of meal, this born out by the amount of wheelbarrows adorning the Peugeot sedans and station wagons in line at the border.

As we neared Harare we were forced to slow down completely because of the smoke belching busses dragging themselves along the road. We moved so slowly that an old woman shuffling beside us in tattered leather slippers made better headway than we did. Despite this slow pace during the last quarter of our journey, we arrived only six minutes tardy outside the Mount Pleasant home.

We tooted our horn as we drove along the precisely trimmed hedge of the one acre property to the diamond wired gate. The beaming face of the gardener greeted us as we pulled into the driveway and he swung open the gate. Everyone sitting at tables inside the marquee, on the lawn, turned to greet us. They waved and smiled and called out. We had made it.

Thanks to the my husband's "drastic" measures, his allies in the Zimbabwean immigration building, the maroon SE380, the open road to Harare and a little bit of Irish luck, we had made my sister-in-law's 50th Birthday celebrations.

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