

Return to Rubya's red earth.

Oké, so you arrive at Entebbe airport and it's all a lot less hot than you remember. On top of that, every Tom Dick and Harry has a mobile phone now and you can't see women with babies on their backs anywhere. But the light in the bog doesn't work, it stinks to high heaven and there's no lock on the door. *Plus ça change.*

It's only when we're out of the overcrowded city and driving through the suburbs that the familiar odours of charcoal fires, burning greenery, petrol, meat skewers, stinking fish and rotting fruit start to penetrate the nostrils. Yes, this is undeniable Africa.

It all started forty years ago, when I stumbled artlessly into my own version of a prince on a white horse, even though he did not arrive on horseback but on a battered and creaky bicycle. He told me on our first date that he wanted to go to Africa and was looking for a blonde nurse. This did not appeal to me. Not for all the money in the world would I go to Africa. I didn't fancy that much. Wild horses couldn't have dragged me to Africa, I wasn't blonde and I wasn't a nurse either. And this medical student wasn't my type anyway.

But then, suddenly, I fell very much in love and life took a course that nobody had foreseen. We arrived four years later - I was 24, mother of one toddler and pregnant with number two - in this same city, and drove the same route to Kampala for our first night's stay. Not in a hotel, but with a 'white' sisterhood. The rush-hour then was less of a rush. And the road so poor that I was worried for the baby in my belly.

Now, at the same place all those years later, I feel confused. And this is just the beginning! Tomorrow, once the rest of the group have arrived, we'll heading for the mission station where we all worked varying lengths of time.

It's been there fifty years - a good reason for a party, reckoned the thoroughly Africanized staff. They also felt that the white doctors from days gone by, ought to be there.

So after a lot of phone calls, e-mails back and forth and a lot of talking, a group of irregulars was put together consisting of former doctors in tropical medicine, family members and two religious representatives.

The youngest of the group is a multiculti baby of six months. The oldest a nun of over eighty. And somewhere in between is the doctors family, that was the last to leave Rubya. Only their three year old youngest was born in the Netherlands.

The journey, including all formalities at the border and the ritual stop-over at the equator, will take nine hours. But for now, we are at the hotel.

I'm happy to have a break. It gives me time to acclimatize and gather my thoughts.

By the time the rest of the party appear two days later, and a bright red bus arrives at the hotel, we are all ready to move on.

I'm in one of the front seats because of my motion sickness and I am gratefully preoccupied with the baby who drools away while looking up at me with those trusting wide eyes.

The road is much better than it used to be. We pass herds of goats with their goatherds, whacking the poor animals just like their fathers did. We speed past huts, banana trees, coffee bushes, and tea plantations, as well as acacia trees, firmly rooted in the red soil.

Baby Lucas' behaviour is exemplary and he quickly falls asleep after pulling my shell necklace apart. That is my own fault, but I couldn't resist his broad smile and joyful babbling. We are rudely awakened during the last part of our journey by being shaken back and forth just like in the old days, by the colossal potholes in the road and rocks lying on it.

Enthusiastically we point out many familiar spots.

The sun sets majestically as in my book 'The Golden Light of Africa'.

In a haze of red dust and in this golden light of the evening we pass the settlement where I once bought school exercise books with a rabbit on the label for teaching English to my kitchen princess. Would I be seeing her again ??

At last, though sooner than expected, we arrive at the hospital. There are lots of new buildings crammed in between, and it looks totally different now.

The tiny rhubarb plot where I once picked the filling for my rhubarb pies has vanished.

I feel cheated. I'd had my reservations about this enterprise and initially had not wanted to come along. After all, what would it do to my memories?

Might they not simply turn to dust, or at least fade in the harsh glare of contemporary reality?

But the thought of missing the party became too much to bear and now I stumble along with the others, uphill, towards the doctor's house, suppressing the memories that are threatening to drown me.

The first shock is that the house hiding in the green twilight surroundings is not a lovely cream colour, but skyblue – what idiot picked that colour?

The second and much larger shock is even more overwhelming, the panoramic view has practically disappeared! Where grass, stones and shrubs once caught the eye, letting you drink in the panorama across the valley, I now see a large number of stout banana trees rustling in the wind.

I have hardly any time to ponder all these first impressions: there are too many of us and we need to be assigned quickly to our temporary residences, the houses that were built at a later stage. To my inexpressible delight, my husband and I including the family with three boys, are able to stay at our 'own' former doctor's house.

After a chaotic and emotional evening with lots of visitors, hugs and people chatting away in three languages, we retire to the former nursery.

The nursery has a huge bed with a mosquito netting that is slightly too small, so it takes a while before we are 'installed' in the gauze cage.

Somewhat surprised by all this, we look at each other 'there weren't any mosquito nets before because there were no mosquito's, 'we say, and then fall into a deep sleep.

The next morning, strolling through the doors that open onto the 'balcony' – the house is built on a slope – I see the three year old running round with his arms wide just like a young foal. He looks as if he is right 'at home'.

The freshly made bread baked by the former housemaid smells heavenly.

'give- us – this- day- our- daily- bread' only works if someone makes it first.

That's no worry for Hilde she overjoyed that the house – after years of being empty, is once again inhabited by 'whites'.

The following day when we join the festivities and are listening to interminable speeches by bishops, I volunteer to return to the house with Gert Jan who can no longer be kept in check during these official events. This will be the first time of many when I use him as my excuse to escape.

While standing on the balcony later that day, I look straight at the roof of the playhouse we once built. The burning sun has bleached the bright red colour of the roof, and torrential rains have leached it to a rust-speckled grey. At the time we had felt that it would be decadent the idea that it would be decadent to build a small brick house for your child in a country where most people live in mud huts. However they assured us, that this was an incorrect assumption.

Building a house for your car though, that would be odd!

That quote pops into my mind as I walk down the sloping lawn and open the decayed door.

The interior of the leprechaun-sized house stares back at me indifferently. For a brief moment I recall the miniature chairs and small hands busily pouring lemonade into spotted cups, while even tinier hands stuff his mouth with slices of cake intended for 'visitors'.

Looking up I 'see' the camping cot for our baby on the balcony covered by a mosquito net. Passion flowers with their curly tendrils and bright green leaves cling to the walls and weave through the balcony bars.

But this vision fades away, a lizard skittishly climbs the grimy wall, the baraza is empty and the lush passion bushes have disappeared.

In a gloomy mood I trudge up the slope once again, seat myself with a bowl of peanuts at the corner of the balcony, the most spacious area. The three year old has meanwhile found a friend to join him running in circles on the elephant grass. Circling and circling they end up in the front yard, discover the small house and storm inside, Gert Jan in the lead.

Just seconds later they come out again, huffing and puffing at the same time, leaving the door wide carelessly wide open behind them. The house had been weighed up and found wanting. I feel sorry for this grimy building.

It's pleasant to be alone for a while. Memories of the same place and sharing the same house, are so confusing. They tumble together, block or suppress each other. At times they run synchronously, but often enough they don't.

I take a deep breath, observe that the smell here is the same: charcoal, burned leaves and the fresh minty aroma of eucalyptus trees bordering the house on two sides.

The colours have not changed either: the reddish-brown of the soil, the overpowering verdant green of everything that grows, the blue sky above, and in between a glittering swathe of Lake Victoria.

The wind still blows, specifically on this spot where we often enjoy coffee, tea or wine, while chatting. At times Tanzanians join us, who have almost always come to visit the last family to leave..

Only a handful of them still remember us. That was quite hard to take..

One of them, the uncle of my dear house maid told me that he had only recently been able to find her address; she works at a refugee camp, far away, and is doing well. I conceal my disappointment.

We are pleased though that Angela, the former kitchen princess for the nuns was present. Angela knew how to use a Dutch cookery book well, and made some excellent meals. She even made me Dutch oliebollen for New Year. And when my own bread baking misfired, she miraculously showed up with bread for our family.

We were pregnant at the same time and our sons were born only three days apart.

Her son is the father of the multicultural baby who was able to doze for hours on end in his white mother's baby carrier during our journey.

Our son lives in Berlin with his wife and child.

As soon as she has left, Gert Jan drags me off to the animal cages to show me the rabbits who now occupy this space.

During our contract there were stalls here with pigs, goats, chicken and ducks, and the air was redolent with farmyard smells.

Nobody no one really wanted to have pigs again after that.

One morning I wake up with a vague feeling that something special should be happening. The entire house is silent. The mist lingers outside and the wind is making the banana leaves whisper and rustle.

The sound is like the sea swelling and receding.

The melancholic screeching of the ravens actually emphasizes this impression. As soon as the sun rises, the silver streak of Lake Victoria starts glittering, as if sprinkled with diamonds. I gently push the window open and take in the fresh morning air. Suddenly I realize it's our youngest son's birthday.

Simultaneously with the memories of the birth of our son, the sun appears as a bright shining sphere above the murmuring sea of leaves.

Effortlessly the text on his birth announcement card comes to mind, a text I rewrote have endlessly on cards made of banana leaves and dried bougainvillea.

'The sun rises, two voices singing...is that you mother? You my child?'

Several hours later sitting on the balcony I text a message to Berlin and get an instant reply. 'Great mum, thanks.'

When he was born it took three weeks before the first congratulations reached us. A little later, during the hour of the Golden Light, a gust of wind topples my wineglass from the table. I pick up the fragments and feel perfectly happy.