

The solid facts of a life

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Since the day I met Prof I have been writing his obituary. I was studying at his alma mater when he invited the college to send a student to spend a month with him in northern Nigeria, where he had been teaching zoology for fifteen years. Our first meeting was by phone in the early summer of 2009. I believed the call would be to finalise plans for my trip that September. When my phone rang I was in the attic room of my parents' house, looking out into the dusk over North London. In the distance was the mast of Alexandra Palace which transmitted the world's first high-definition television in 1936. Prof's voice reached me like a faint broadcast crackling through the dark over the rooftops.

Our conversation that evening was unhelpful. He thought I was coming in July, but I wouldn't even have a visa till August. Rather than help me arrange the flights or set the dates, he ignored my questions and slowly listed the items I should bring. I doodled as he spoke, jotting down his instructions:

You will need a prophylactic against malignant tertian malaria. Dress modestly, down to wrists and ankles! Keep \$50 in your underpants. It will be hot, but I find it helps to clip all your body hair down to about 1cm.

For our second meeting two weeks later, I was given directions to the Farmer's Club, an ornate building on Whitehall. From a marble floored entrance foyer, I was shown down a wood-panelled hallway to a room with a long table. The light of the chandelier reflected off

the polished wood and illuminated the flowered wallpaper. At the far end of the table was a figure huddled in a chair. The figure stirred, and, with a rattling noise, Prof began to take shape. The voice was the same as on the phone, now accompanied by pale blue eyes and lithe wispy eyebrows.

Among the Dinka of South Sudan a bride's family receive a group of cows upon marriage. If they break up, the cows have to be returned of the exact same specification: the trouble of it keeps families together.

He proceeded to repeat much of what he had said on the phone. In that room with flower-print wallpaper, and later the dining room that overlooked the trees of Victoria Gardens and the Thames beyond, our relationship took the form that came to define it. He spoke at length, and I wrote it down.

Cowpea roots have nitrogen fixing properties. They are edible and highly proteinous: a poor man's meat. It is a most economic crop, because there are various foods you can make from it. Of course, rainfall is the big problem. Will there be an agricultural solution? Or will people just migrate?

He spelled out the Latin name of the mosquitos they have in Borno and sketched the human geography of Nigeria, with the Hausa/Fulani dominating the whole top half of the country, and the Yoruba and the Igbos taking a bottom quadrant each, interspersed with numerous minority populations. I still have the map he drew, with the shuddering, seismographic lines. He marked a cross in the top right corner for where we would have our third meeting: Maiduguri.

The British arrived to find a Maiduguri without trees. Most of the trees you see in the city are not indigenous. But then the early extension officers were mindful of only one thing: total clearance; more land meant more cash crops.

After dinner, we went downstairs to find him a taxi for him. Prof was still talking but increasingly slowly, like a music box winding down. With no taxis waiting outside the club, we went to ask at the neighbouring hotel.

'Good evening', Prof stopped to rummaged inside his jacket. Turning to me he produced a small reporter's notebook and a mobile phone.

'Please call Anita. Her number is in there somewhere'

I paged through the notebook. Most of the pages were blank. There couldn't have been more than four or five numbers in total, each written in different handwriting, with a first name or a hotel underneath. I found Anita, typed in her number, and gave the phone to Prof, the ringing dimly audible. I left him there, waiting for who knows what, and made my way back to the bright hubbub of Trafalgar Square.

From the airport in Kano to Maiduguri is a seven hour drive. Sule Buba Sara, a student of Prof's from twenty years ago and now his closest colleague, travelled out to meet me. Along the way I kept writing, leaning my notebook on my backpack in my lap, agog at the cattle herders, the roadside petrol stands and mosques with crescent moons like TV aerials. We passed through the red-orange-yellow earth of Jigawa, Bauchi, and Yobe into Borno.

In Sule's house, everyone referred to Prof as 'the Emeritus'.

Now I think we have time for another short lecture, do you have a pen and paper?

Through his lectures I heard about the time he helped establish the Free University of Libya, before being chased out by Gaddafi. He told me about his years in Oxford's rather motley wartime Civilian Defence Force. One night his regiment were mobilised after screams were heard on the green in front of University Museum, only for it to be traced to a pair of copulating hedgehogs. It often seemed that what Prof was narrating was not one man's life, but that of a jostling crowd of people, their stories jumbled together. In one story that I never

fully understood he travelled from Cape Town to Johannesburg by train and ended up dancing with a woman in the dining carriage until she was quite sure he wasn't a racist.

Prof told many of these stories from an armchair in his bungalow on the University of Maiduguri campus, wearing only his underpants, barely perceptible in the dark of a blackout. I would sit listening, drenched in sweat, whilst Sule and Momo the housekeeper ate indomie noodles and made Nescafé with hot water out of a thermos. I felt that my life had strayed into the orbit of his, and become subject to his own peculiar gravity.

I was on a P+O Cruise down the edge of Canada. You could see sea otters lying on blocks on ice. 'Would you like a big table or small?' they'd ask at dinner. I was sat with a hard shelled American republican alpha male. I would have liked to stick a pin in him and keep him in my collection! When he discovered I worked in Nigeria, he began to drool. For my part, I became rather that stuffy Englishman. In my book it's not done to kiss and tell!

As my time in Nigeria drew on, this role I'd assigned myself, to record Prof's broadcasts, became increasingly onerous.

I should be rather careful of being raped. I should be rather careful of who is making up to you. In fact, I would not do anything otherwise you may be labelled an easy lay and that would close a lot of doors to you very quickly. ...It's not that I've not had affairs, I've had affairs with people who - as it were - did not affect a family structure.

I mean, you're barely here three weeks, I'm sure you can hold out till then.

Over the month spent with Sule's family and Prof it became clear that Prof had been talking for years.

Sule's children, some of them older than me, would fight to make sure they were not the one stuck with him alone in the parlour after lunch. From deep within a huge armchair, in the stuffy inside dark of the midday, he would talk and talk, a picture of him twenty years earlier hanging on the wall. Whoever was least swift-footed would have to stay and listen.

Even I – with my freedoms as a guest, and with the ready excuse of sickness to escape to my room – would get trapped. Pen in hand, and pinned down by the weight of his talking; as stifling as the heat. Prof himself seemed to tire of it too but could not change course. The life he had lived weighed heavy on him and yet he could not free himself from telling it.

There is no inherent reason why Nigeria cannot support tourism. 140 million inhabitants and 2-3 per cent have enough to engage in tourism. It must be eco-based, cultural tourism focusing on people's traditions. The masquerade masks in the south, the Argungu fishing festival on the Sokoto river, and the Durbar here in Maiduguri.

I soon realised that not all of these transmissions were broadcast live; many were reruns. When it was especially hot, or our plans for research were muddled and delayed, Prof grew tired. What came out then were not even repeats, but mash ups, with phrases that would skip or get stuck on repeat. On one page I have written the following:

He whispers 'Do you follow? Am I correct?'

Looks from me to Sule 'Good.' Nods.

'Listen. See things as they are, not as you want them to be.'

Falls asleep.

I returned from Maiduguri with a box full of notebooks and folds of lined paper, some written by torchlight and illegible. Every summer from then on when he came back to London we would meet again at the Farmer's Club and go over and over these same stories. He talked, I wrote it down. Much of it was credo, or mantra, or recitation. I transcribed whole passages multiple times. They sit in my notebooks from 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, the same thing nearly word for word. Every time, the formulations were delivered with the same intonation, pauses, and emphasis. They were way-markers; they reassured him. What was I

doing writing it? The text was no longer a transcription of real-life speech, with the magical sense of catching a moving target; it too was part of the ritual.

I came to understand these ritualistic retellings as a process of shoring up; to see that as we pass our greatest years and our bodies become more fragile, we must rely more on the solidity of the stories that they contain to give us shape. Eventually, the first must give way to the second, and in a final act of reverse causation, the obituary is the weight that eventually extinguishes the life.

Indeed this is the point at which most obituaries are written. The stories of a life lived well, incubated first in the person and then in the written word. I could hardly complain that I didn't have enough material. It would start like this:

William Styan Richards was born in Masham on 21 February 1920 to B F Richards, Westmore House, Stanwix, Carlisle. As he liked to recall, his mother was told that due to health problems she wouldn't raise him to adulthood, but 'She was a very obstinate Yorkshire woman.

In all this constancy, something did change within Prof around 2015. This period was ushered in by disaster. He suffered a fall and was rushed to University Hospital Maiduguri with a broken pelvis. Eventually he was flown back to the UK and took up residence in St Luke's Hospital, a private convalescence home on the outskirts of Oxford.

By this point my name had been added to the reporter's notepad and occasionally I would get phone messages from him that started with someone in the background saying 'She's not there, this is her voicemail'. I was part of a small rota of visitors that included his daughter Anita, Mariam - a student of his from Maiduguri now settled in the UK, and Mariam's husband Andy.

On one of my visits up from London, I arrived to see him propped up on pillows beneath a purple fleece patterned with pink hearts. Someone had combed his white hair in a neat side parting. As I pulled over a chair, he explained that he had been '*washed, dressed, swept and garnished*' in anticipation of my visit.

He went over some of his well-worn subjects: how Nigerian troops were set up for ambush on their return from Chibok, the rise of Dan Gote to Africa's richest man, the importance of Birmingham to the industrial revolution. After a couple of minutes he sighed and chewed his teeth a few times, allowed his head to nod forward as his face fell into repose. In the quiet all I could hear was the clatter of nurses rolling lunch trolleys to other rooms down the corridor.

For many people, as they get older, they sink ever deeper into themselves until they are entirely unreachable. Yet, in the last year that I knew Prof he stayed resolutely in the world, though the boundaries between people and places and times seemed to be dissolving at the edges. Sometimes he'd turn to me, study my face for a moment and smile '*You have grown up! To think you were once that little girl who was afraid of going underground at Charing Cross station!*' Or he'd spend twenty minutes on his daughter's lectures about radio-astronomy and the lunar eclipse, before folding his hands over his chest '*Well, Anita has the files and she can give them to you when you return to England.*'

New stories started to emerge. These were more fragile than the others, and struggled to contain the events of the past, rather than keeping them firmly in place. In the telling, these stories would rise up and grab Prof, causing his voice to break. The humiliation of being turned away from the army during the war and the pride of signing up with the home guard, mingled with sense of betrayal and vulnerability of a Britain alone on the beaches of Calais. '*We were there with scythes tied onto poles and father's shotgun. Hitler said he'd have us. He was the only man whose bad opinion we wanted, and we got it!*'

Rather than old age setting him in stone, the opposite process seemed to take place within Prof. Some essential self seemed to be floating to the surface, breaking through the rigid veneer of the well-worn stories, evanescing on the shine of his corneas and in his fingertips.

In a dream once, he saw World War II coming and took up arms in Spain *'I'll shock you: I was on the German side.'* Studying enemy tactics from the inside he leads a squadron of German aircraft to England and gets captured; *'I had it all worked out in the dream. I rang the Poles,'* he mused. *'But that was a dream and a late dream too.'* He reached out for my hand. Was the war coming closer, with insurgents at the arches of the city of Maiduguri, or German planes thundering over Oxford to bomb Coventry *'like Gabriel's hands chasing lost souls across the sky'?*

In these moments when the past was in the present and the quad of Queen's College Oxford sat on the edge of the Sahara it didn't seem odd that the future, too, was in easy reach. *'Rather than going through the pearly gates, I've always thought I'd ask St Paul if I could just sit on the side for a bit, as the world continued to spin.'* He tries twice to clear his throat. *'I could watch and see what happens next.'*

'Or,' he looks up at me with his eyebrows raised and a glint in his pale eyes, *'I go straight to God and ask if I can have my own planet. So I can conduct experiments.'*

After a year in St Luke's he insisted on returning to Nigeria. Though the Foreign Office was advising against any and all travel by British citizens to Borno state, he was impatient to get on with projects he'd left unfinished. Despite using a wheelchair Prof flew back into Maiduguri in November of 2016. As Mariam said with a mixture of resignation and awe, *'impossible is not a word in his dictionary.'* I got a call from Sule that night – Prof, he said, was tired but had enjoyed his favourite meal, chicken liver. The next morning they would set about making arrangements for restarting the indigenous trees project.

Of course, all obituaries have the same ending.

'Professor Richards died of natural causes in Maiduguri on 11 November 2016. He is survived by his brother, Martin, and his daughter, Anita.'

Despite all the talking, the folders of paper that sit in boxes in my flat, and the lucidity of his final year back in Oxford, there were still blanks. When I offered the following January to write Prof's obituary, I thought I could complete the story once and for all. With Prof himself out of the picture I could work more directly on finding out who he was. A research trip took me back to Maiduguri that summer. Eight years had passed since my last visit; Prof had been dead six months. His photo still hung above the armchair. The funeral was held in the middle of harmattan season, when dry dust blows in from the Sahara and makes venturing outside a chore; a thousand people came. The tree plantation had been dedicated to his memory, with the University donating a hectare of land, and Sule had temporarily moved out of the family compound to a small bungalow on the edge of the campus to water the 20,000 seedlings at dawn and dusk.

But these were just traces, echoes of him. At one point I opened WhatsApp to find that Prof had appeared on my list of contacts, pale eyes squinting out against a bright blue sky. Before the funeral I had circulated some photos of him on a boat trip on Alau Dam near Lake Chad in 2009. Sule's eldest daughter Zainab daughter had set it as her profile picture.

Failing to find anything to solidify Prof in Maiduguri I decided to go back to Queen's. I discovered through emailing Jen, the Old Members Secretary, that he had an entry in the

Students record book that was stored in the College archive. Perhaps here, where Prof's life was woven into the sturdy fabric of a 900 year history, I could reinforce the thin threads I had managed to grasp of his life.

Jen met me in a high-ceilinged office off front quad that looked onto the trees of the Provost's garden, their leaves throwing shadows through the hundred year old glass onto the walls. Jen showed me the College Record book for 1940. It bears a photograph of him in a tweed jacket; despite the black and white, the same pale blue eyes peer out. A short, typed entry records his religion as CofE and that he won a Rigge Exhibition in his second year and graduated with a First Class bachelor's degree in Zoology in 1942. He was awarded a PhD less than three years later, barely two months after peace was declared in Europe. Under the record book's broad invitation to record 'Academic Distinctions, College Offices, Sports and Athletics' there is nothing. Career: blank.

Jen offered to photocopy the page for me and suggested that I might get more information from Emily, her predecessor, now the College Communications Officer. I got lost in the long corridors and half floors of my old college. When I finally knocked at a plain white panelled door, I recognised Emily from her photo that always adorned the back page of the magazine.

'He was definitely the oldest person at college events... And what a life!' she exclaimed.

She remembered him fondly, but held no key to the puzzle of who he really was. As I walked from her little office with a view of the magnolia tree, out into front quad, I felt cheated. It was her job to remember, to be secretary to people's nostalgia! I got little more from the Provost, nothing beyond this same image of an old man with an exciting life.

That day in Oxford I told and retold my stories about Prof: the initial phone call in my parents' attic, the meeting in the Farmers Club, the long month of story-telling in the dark in Maiduguri. Not only the stories of his life that I had taken stewardship of, but recent stories,

that he had never narrated, only starred in: the time he sent 'Miss Emily' a full set of white Egyptian cotton bed sheets from Maiduguri to Oxford on the occasion of her wedding; him dictating a letter to the *Guardian* from his hospital bed in Headington on the subject of 'a home of rest for dictators' and spelling out to me the name of Napoleon's ship; his climbing the ninety steps at the entrance to the Marble Arch Odeon when we went to see a blockbuster sci-fi film together two years before. 'It was a good film,' he remarked when it finished, 'but whenever they disagreed, they had a fight.'

In the rhythm of my own re-tellings, I could have sought solidity, as Prof seemed to; shoring up a single narrative of an impressive life. But I have always felt that I only had partial sight of Prof, knew him barely in snippets. Between the pages of writing, the hours of telling, I could never get a hold of the solid facts of his life, could never get a straight answer. Looking back at the dappled, obscured image I had of him, and that I have tried to show here in all its shifting uncertainty, I am struck by the fact that this is as well as we ever know anyone.