**Diary Part 1 – April 2023**

**Wednesday 12th April**

Didn’t go to bed at all Tuesday night as the taxi collected us for the airport at 2.30am. Consequently somewhat knackered by the end of the day finally arriving at Equator hotel at about. 9.30 pm. The trip in itself was relatively uneventful. No delays thank goodness. Last visit we were delayed over 12 hours after flooding in Dubai. This time we were with KLM – a much superior airline. The planes were full to capacity having combined two flights – good environmental stuff going on. The airline is cutting overheads to the bone but I was pleased to see wooden cutlery rather than the old plastic stuff. Unfortunately for me I was sitting behind a Dutch chap who clearly was suffering from flatulence to the nth degree which was pretty unpleasant. I had to go to the loo for some relief from the ghastly pongs emanating from his nether regions. The joys of travel. We have both decided we are getting a bit long in the tooth for these long-haul flights and the various rituals that go with it. I don’t know how many more times we will make it to Tanzania in the future.

We arrived early at Kilimanjaro airport and for once the immigration process went quite quickly and smoothly. Even all our 4 bags were waiting for us. And then there was lovely Silvester waiting for us with the biggest smile on his gorgeous face. He really is a lovely man and it was a relief to see a familiar face. He chats away in the car on the way into Arusha bringing us up to date with various bits of news. President Samia appears to be as corrupt as all the others. She spends a lot of money swanning about not doing very much. Tanzania really needs to get this corruption stuff sorted but I don’t think it ever will. It’s endemic in the nation it seems to me. Very sad. China is worming its way into the country steadily and insidiously with all its anti-American rhetoric.

The Jacaranda hotel, where we used to stay with Ad many years ago has been sold by Ad’s sister-in-law and turning into a very expensive infertility clinic/hospital. Apparently the rooms are luxurious and clearly this will only be accessible to wealthy patients. Ilboru Lodge, where we also used to stay with Ad, is now run by some character who has annoyed Silvester because he never pays his bills when Silvester is doing taxi work for the hotel.

Silvester’s elder daughter is about to complete a three year university course and was talking to us about the costs involved. It’s scary. I simply cannot see how the charity will afford to send our young people onto graduate courses unless some funding is forthcoming from somewhere. It’s a shame, having educated them well up to A-level equivalent standard. And jobs are hard to come by. Silvester is going to come and talk to them all about how he pulled himself up by his boot strings and has made a success of his life by hard work and enterprise. We are concerned that Grace still appears to be doing nothing – not OK as it is at our expense and no contribution to the household income. I think she is in for a bit of a talking to. It’s time to get tough I think. Oh dear – always some problem to sort out. I think Catherine is coming this afternoon (Thursday) so we will find out a lot more then.

**Thursday 13th**

The humidity is enormous. It’s raining and thunder is rolling around. Sweating profusely as I sit here writing this diary. The hotel hasn’t changed at all. This evening (as I now write) it has turned quite chilly – I am even sitting in bed with a hot water bottle on my aching back. Tremendous thunderstorms with torrential downpour this afternoon. Mama Catherine arrived at about 3pm just avoiding the worst of the storm. Prior to her arrival we have had a relaxing day catching up on emails and reading etc. so feel considerably less exhausted this evening.

So, where to start with news from Catherine. She is 58 – having discovered she is three years older than she thought she was. She doesn’t look it. But she has creaky knees and shoulders – arthritis it would seem - so her body is doing what bodies do as they age. Her Mum had bad arthritis as did mine so a strong genetic link there. We did a lot of catching up on the status of the various youngsters in our care. Grace still hasn’t found a job in her veterinary-related field despite looking continuously. She has managed to find a little live-in job with food, working in a shop as a stop gap so that's something. David likewise is struggling to find a business/accountancy job but is driving a bujaji as a stop gap whilst continuing to look. Elia is at College in his 2nd year of Social Studies but doesn’t want to continue after the third year. Not sure why he went into the course into the first place. He has developed a rather large interest in the opposite sex so is getting all sorts of lectures and dire warnings from Catherine. Grace and David both have boyfriend and girlfriend respectively. How they have all changed over the time we have known them – about 15 years now I guess. The “big four” still haven’t been allotted their places for Form 5/6. It would appear that the government is about as useless as it has ever been – Catherine reiterated Silvester’s comments about corruption being terrible. So depressing. And the sticky subject about higher education has been broached. I have had to explain that no way can the charity continue to support the youngsters after they have completed A-Levels or equivalent. We really do need to get our thinking caps on to try and find some way of helping them to continue on to higher education – any ideas please get in touch. I am running short on brain cells where this problem is concerned. I will write more about the younger ones next time when I have more information. We will visit Joram and Jordan at school next week. David will come to drive us in his little bujaji to Maasai Market to see Mama Grace on Saturday which will be fun. Hopefully we can see Grace at some point so I can probe further on the boyfriend stuff – nosy Grandma style. My stated task from Catherine is to give the “big four” another little homily on sex and relationship matters which should be entertaining. Poor Catherine living with so many hormonally charged youngsters. She is brilliant with them all. This is a snapshot of our hours of conversation. Plenty of other things will pop up as I remember them so will write more tomorrow. Up to the house at 11am with Silvester.

**Friday 14th April**

The horrors and rigours of the trip to get here seemed to fade into the distance after spending a day at Usalama House. Silvester took us plus large bags of stuff for the household up there: the roads are as bad as ever. We had to get out twice so that he could get the car over various ridges and ruts. I shall never again complain about potholes on our UK roads. We were greeted on arrival by Anna and the children. I use the word ‘children’ very loosely. They are not children anymore; they are young people. They are tall and strong and totally delightful. They are the fruits of our labours and the hard work of Catherine and Anna, not forgetting our lovely sponsors in the UK who have all contributed to the welfare of the youngsters. It takes a village – and all of us and more are a part of the world village that has made these people what they are. I am so proud of them. They are a credit to us all.

We spent a good deal of time trying to get their ages and stages into my thick skull. I forget that not only are we getting older but they are also. Where did all the years go? It seems no time at all since we had our first night with them all at the old house after they had arrived. It is etched in my heart forever. Discussing what they wanted to call Catherine – Mama of course, despite Grace’s opposition. “But she is my Mum”!! And they all truly see Catherine as their Mum and each other as brothers and sisters. It’s lovely to see.

Silvester stopped for chai with us so Mike and I took him through a little exercise regime to try and help the pains in his feet which seem to be plantar fasciitis. He promises to do them and report back to us. He agreed to come back for us at 5.00pm; very good of him given the potential risks to his car. Mike took a tour of the house and the shamba. All is well and they are growing sugar cane, sweet and cooking bananas, green vegetables, chillis, avocado and some sort of pumpkin. Chickens are doing well and excess eggs and bananas are sold to supplement the household income. Goodluck has a family of bunny rabbits which he assures me are not for eating. They are really cute. I tried to explain that rabbits breed like rabbits – not sure he got what I was on about. Charlie the dog is in good health and remembered us. Butu the cat is looking a bit old and seems to be walking quite stiffly. Arthritis probably.

Goodluck, our Mr. President, says that when he becomes a decent president of Tanzania, his first appointment will have to be a food taster. So this person will try his food and he will wait five minutes to see if the taster survives. But as some poisons take much longer we then decided he will have to cook his own food. But what if the food is already poisoned? He will have to shop for or grow his own food to be on the safe side. No time for presidential matters. Grace had apparently found what appeared to be a very good job in her field of animal health. It came with full board and lodging and a good salary. One snag! A very big snag! In return she was expected to provide the male employer with sexual favours. “No one will use me in that way!” she said and of course turned the job down. Bastard. It is a common problem in Tanzania and wealthy men are immune from investigation as they can simply bribe their way out of any trouble. According to Mercy, Grace’s boyfriend named Jonathan is very nice and she thinks the relationship is serious. We may get to meet him. Grace has to work seven days a week and very long hours for not much salary so we wait to see if she can get any time off.

Anna is as quiet and reserved as ever. She has taken on another child of her sister – Juliana has been with her for several years now and the new child is called Paulina. I wish the charity could afford to help her with her education but we are stretched to the limit unless someone is prepared to sponsor her. So she is just going to a local school. Anna is now 42 so I think it is unlikely she will ever have one of her own after numerous miscarriages. She must be very sad but won’t communicate much to anyone including Catherine. Such a shame for Anna. I’ve realised as I write this I am now feeling awful about Paulina – it seems unfair to help Juliana and not Paulina. Oh dear. Life is so hard here.

Goodluck, Aron, Domi and Mercy have been at home for nearly six months and still don’t know where they are going next. They must be pretty bored by now. But they are kept busy doing chores for Catherine. There is no guarantee that they will be sent to the same place; in fact it is highly unlikely that that will happen. When it does happen it is going to quite a wrench for them all having been together for so long, but they seem to be pretty resilient and stoical about it. I hope it works out well for them. We realised that it is Mercy’s birthday next week so we will have a little party for her. She wants the stuff they have loved since they were children. Peanut butter sandwiches, jam sandwiches and cake etc. So sweet. So we will shop for that next Monday. Grace had saved enough money when she was being paid to do Teddy’s job in the house to buy a little electric oven with two hobs. It is very expensive to run so is only used when Grace wants to bake her famous cakes. But Grace is not at home so we are having a baking competition. Boys, 3 plus Mike, versus girls – Mercy, Anna, Catherine and me. None of us has a clue how to make this famous cake and there are no scales and usual utensils so I can’t be of much help. I think Mercy is going to try and get instructions from Grace – these will be kept secret from the boys of course. Not that we are cheating!! Should be fun if not a total disaster. We have to find a neutral judge who is immune to bribery. We have a strong ant-bribery policy in the charity so we will have to adhere to it I suppose. Watch this spot for the outcome of this event. But enough of this for one evening. My bed is beckoning. Off to see Mama Grace at Maasai Market tomorrow with our personal bujaji driver, David. Catherine and Mercy are coming here and we will all go together.

**Saturday April 15th**

A red letter day today. Our own personal driver, namely David, came to pick us up to take us down to Maasai Market. He was very proud to be in charge and for me it felt like going out in the car for the first time when an offspring has passed their driving test. David told me about his girlfriend who is still at college in Kigoma on the other side of the country. He will see her again when he goes there to collect his diploma in procurement and logistics. She is four years younger than him and the daughter of a pastor. He wouldn’t let on whether or not it was serious. Mercy spent a lot of the day playing off me against Mike by various wily and minx-like means – little so-and-so she is. But also very cute. I have known her since she was about 2 or 3 – we are really like her extended family and we can share lots of funny memories together. Some she remembers and others not. She stayed the night with me several times when I stayed at Ilboru; on one memorable occasion it was her birthday treat and when we had breakfast together in the morning I was astonished at how much food she shovelled in. It was extraordinary. She was egged on by lovely Ad. She apparently went home and regaled the others with the entire list of what she had eaten. She is very bright and we taught her how to do simple Sudoku on the computer. She picked it up very fast.

It was lovely to see Mama Grace again. She is a kind and gentle person. We spent a merry time selecting items for me to take home to sell. Mercy was very helpful, Mike sat on a seat and went to sleep and poor Catherine looked very pained as her shoulder and knees are giving her jip. We have offloaded a lot of our various pain killers and rubs onto her and Mama Grace will try to lay on hands!! As well as getting her doctor daughter Grace to talk to her. I have really stocked up on lots of different bits and bobs and hope that we can make good money selling over the summer especially at the Riverside Festival beginning of June.

We went for lunch at the rather basic little café in the market. I paid way less than £4 for three substantial meals. Compared to everywhere else it is incredibly cheap. It only serves local food but Mike and I shared a chipsy mayai (chip omelette) which was yummy. Mercy consumed a whole portion to herself and Mama Grace and Catherine shared a plateful of goodness knows what. Mike had been engaged in conversation by the stall holder opposite who was sure that the end of the world was nigh as was the end of Sodom and Gomorrah. I made the mistake of asking what that was all about to Mama Grace. This set off a very heated and worrying discussion about being gay in this country. Basically it is illegal – prison worthy illegal. Even if anyone at school would mention the subject they would be expelled immediately. We could have been arrested if anyone listening to our conversation had chosen to report us to the authorities. Mama Grace was immovable on the subject and Catherine seemed to agree with her stance until we talked about it later. She was able to acknowledge the privileges of freedom of choice and free speech that we have in our country. I may have a chat to the big four if the opportunity arises but it’s a fine line between respecting their culture and challenging grossly unfair practices in this country. The opposition leader a few years ago tried to bring up the subject and got himself shot for his troubles. All very educational and somewhat disturbing. But I suppose 50 years ago the UK wasn’t so very different.

David fetched us back to Equator and came back at 6 to take his Mum and sister home. So we spent a couple of hours in our room chatting away, doing Sudoku and in Mercy’s case eating packets of biscuits. She is a little gannet. Catherine and I compared our birthing stories- the sort of thing us women seem to do from time to time. She was amazed that I was allowed to have my third child at home and that I was present at the birth of my first great-granddaughter. Even partners are not allowed in the birthing room here. And so another day in this weird place has come to an end. After two attempts at trying to have a hot shower I was successful. Some bright spark had forgotten to switch on the pump. So clean and sweet-smelling I am going to bed to prepare myself for a potentially harrowing trip to see Julieth at Magi ya Chai with Catherine and Aron in a bujaji. Goodness knows how long it will take to get there if we ever do get there. Watch this spot.

**Sunday April 16th**

I cried today. I was so moved by the love and care that Julieth gives to her Coco (grandmother). Coco has got to be at least 113 years old and that’s assuming she had her youngest child of seven when she was around 50. Julieth’s mother is already 84 and there are three older siblings one of which is already dead. Coco’s mind is pretty scrambled but she still can make sense of the world. Julieth persuaded her to stand with her and dance the Maasai dance with appropriate noises and she agreed as long as Mike and I joined in much to the hilarity of Catherine and others. We all clapped and Coco did her ululations appropriately. Quite amazing. Catherine had a conversation about underpants. Coco says she has never worn them in her entire life. If we want we can put pants on her when she is dead. When we left she demanded money to buy a soda and then demanded money from Mike to buy a soda. She wanted to go to the shop on her own and wouldn’t hand over the money for Janita (great-granddaughter) to go. All very childlike but sweet to see all the interactions. Tanzania has many things wrong, especially corruption, but care for family is a huge strength. I am very envious of that.

Julieth is remarkable. She has managed to build a large two storey building to house her many orphans. She is constantly under threat from Social Welfare and they keep dumping more and more on her without any financial support whatsoever. The government refuses to take care of these children in need, or widows or any other needy group. Consequently she is always short of money to feed the children and runs around from pillar to post looking for help. We help her a little but cannot afford to do any more for her. She currently has 37 youngsters in her care as well as her own five children. I didn’t know about the fifth and was confused when I saw her feeding a young child – I assumed she was being a wet nurse but it turned out it was actually number five. More hilarity. She has some help including a temporary social worker but she can’t afford to pay the salary they want so they move on. Bad for Julieth and very bad for all the kids that are already insecure and needy. In addition to the residential side of things she also runs a baby class/day care with help from someone else. Her husband, Mr. Julius, varies between being supportive and very fed up with Julieth constantly accepting more children with all that goes with that. I must say I have some sympathy for him but he knew the score before they married. I have lectured her many times on the way she keeps accepting more and more kids but it falls on deaf ears. She knows she is trying to put things right from her own difficult childhood by helping all these kids but of course that ain’t going to happen. She also has cows, a large allotment and hens so does her best to be self-sufficient but so much is dependent on the weather which is unpredictable to say the least. Magi Ya Chai is a very dry area unlike Arusha and water is frequently problematical for her. She has a well but the cost of pumping water up brings its own problems. A never-ending circle of challenge.

Our trip from Arusha to Magi ya Chai was interesting. David collected us and Catherine sat in front whilst Mike, Joshua and I sat in the back, A bujaji is a three wheeled vehicle – I have seen similar in London recently. They are useful on good roads around town but extremely uncomfortable on longer trips especially when on unmade tracks. The main road wasn’t too bad but by the time we arrived at Julieth’s place – about 15 minutes from the main road – it felt like all my teeth were being shaken out of my head and my backside was somewhat sore. But we survived in the knowledge that we would have to do the whole thing again later to get home. It took about an hour each way. But we had a lovely day with Julieth. She is very annoying but so sweet and loving at the same time. I cannot help but admire her determination and resilience. It was good for David to have some time to relax and play football with the young children and Joshua had a good time. He was lucky to come. It should have been Aron but for some as yet unexplained reason he didn’t want to. Something to do with shoes. I shall enquire further.

We go back to Arusha at about 6 pm. I was desperate for the loo and more desperate for a cup of tea and a good shower. I sat outside and watched huge bats, fruit bats I think, swooping around as dusk turned to night. Fascinating to see. We are skipping dinner as we cannot be bothered to get dressed again. I have a cuppa soup which I shall eat in a minute and then and early night. Town tomorrow to sort out banking, exchange money and shopping for party food for Wednesday, not forgetting the cake-making debacle looming large on the horizon.