

THE INSECTS

Houses with parquet wooden floors, burglar bars, and concrete stoeps, shining red with Cobra wax polish, were ubiquitous in Rhodesia. One surprising omission from Rhodesian homes was the fly screen. It meant Rhodesians developed a unique relationship with the insect world.

In the cooler months, insects were not a major issue, but in summer, especially on extra warm nights, the insects emerged in their thousands. Rhodesians, tolerant by nature, sat in their lounges with insects crawling across the floor, climbing the walls, and clinging to the ceiling. The ever-present wall spiders and visiting lizards enjoyed our lax attitude towards the creatures of the insect world.

On warm nights, we'd keep the lounge door open for fresh air, but on the occasional extra warm night, the lights would attract the insects in ever-increasing numbers. On those occasions, we'd darken the lounge and go onto the wide front veranda, where we'd enjoy our cold drinks under the glare of the veranda lights.

We'd sit in a shower of flying and crawling insects, trying to ignore them, or in my case, fascinated by the variety and quantity of the little creatures. Most notable of these were the fat, round, sixpence sized brown beetles that spent the greater part of the evening on their backs, struggling to right themselves.

If one succeeded, it would then whizz through the air in uncontrolled flight, bumping into the walls, the lights, or one of the family members. To everyone's relief, within seconds, it would once again be lying on its back, struggling to right itself. The very shape of those beetles suggested they weren't designed for flight.

Apart from the clumsy fat beetles, a myriad of other unidentified insects flew and crawled around us. They included a horde of thin tiny creatures with slender transparent wings. Although they looked well suited to flight, they preferred to crawl in numbers not seen since biblical times. You needed to be watchful, as they often ended up floating in your drink.

The array of insect life fascinated me, but most of all, we waited for the rhino beetle's arrival. Usually, only one would turn up, and it was always late for the party. And if none came, they sent the staghorn beetle in their stead. As the evening progressed, the number of insect guests would increase to where even the resilient Rhodesians fled indoors to the incubator house.

One unwelcome guest never attended the party, and this was why the veranda lights remained on. The mosquitos reserved their buzz for the bedroom once we extinguished the lights. In the darkness, before sleep, a game of buzz and slap ensued. You'd hear the buzz until it settled on your face, neck, or arm. No matter how confident you were that you'd squashed the mosquito, its buzzing usually returned within thirty seconds. I particularly disliked the ones that waited an extra minute or two, giving you false confidence, before resuming their attack.

I never understood how the slow-flying insect could elude one's lightning-fast slap. A solution to the problem was the refillable metal spray pump. Sometimes, when mosquitoes were prevalent, we'd spray DDT under the beds and into the dark corners of the room before

bedtime. The pungent chemical was a health risk. Pyrethrum spray was an option, but it's the DDT chemical odour that lingers in my memory.

An unwelcome daytime visitor was the housefly. Flypaper hung in strategic locations proved most effective, with the kitchen being one common site. Dotted with dead flies, the flypaper was unsightly, but it was preferable to the alternative of flies settling on food.

Soon after our arrival in Willsgrove, my cousins warned me about the ticks. The small black bloodsuckers lay in ambush on the long, yellow grass stems. As you passed by, they would transfer to your socks or legs and search for a suitable place to bury their pincers into your skin.

In those days, most adults smoked, and a lit cigarette held close to the offending creature would soon encourage it to withdraw. If you attempted to pull the tick off, its pincers would remain buried in your skin, risking an infection. Fortunately, the bloated, ugly grey ticks didn't trouble us humans, preferring to attach themselves to the dogs.

From the time I lived in Pitsea, in England, the tiny creatures that lived in the garden fascinated me, and Willsgrove was a treasure trove.

To one side of the house stood several large white-ant hills (termites). The organised community these little creatures maintained enthralled me. If the white-ant hill suffered any damage, providing open access, within seconds, large soldier termites with huge pincers would stand guard against intruders while the workers repaired the damage. Overnight, the job was done. I once spent hours in a futile search, digging for the queen, only to be rewarded with my forearms peppered with red bite marks.

I was also interested in other insects. Grasshoppers in their endless variety of colours and sizes occupied my shoebox prison with multiple airholes punched through the lid. The dark interior wouldn't have been much fun for the inmates. Those in glass bottles had better views, but less room to exercise. I soon tired of grasshoppers, so they only served a short stint in detention.

Following a downpour one rainy Sunday afternoon came my first sighting of the flying ants. A cloud of them filled the air. They were everywhere, including the driveway and the veranda. They flew in all directions, and many walked on the veranda floor. Several lost their wings and could no longer fly. The African servants caught them and filled empty tin cans with the unfortunate creatures. Apparently, they tasted something like butter, which I found odd. I expected more of a chicken flavour.

I'd only just begun to explore the property when it was time to start school.