IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #32
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from
FREEMAN PATTERSON

The Incomparable COLLA SWART
(photograph by Willem Oets)

The word "unique" cannot be modified, because it means "one of a kind." When you say that something is "very unique," you are saying that it is not one of a kind, but uncommon or rare. The same goes for "incomparable." You either are or you aren't.

The incomparable Colla Swart, who lived most of her life in or around Kamieskroon in the Namaqualand region of South Africa passed away on May 14, a month shy of her 93rd birthday. She is grieved on many continents.

I last saw Colla at her frail-care home in Piketberg late in February this year and realized as I drove away that I had probably seen her for the last time. So her death did not come as a shock to me, nor even as a surprise, but I wept when the news reached me, because Colla was like a dear sister. We challenged each other, dared each other, fought with each other, learned from each other, and loved each other.

Here is my telling of our story. Colla's would be different, but she is no longer able to contradict me, so mine is the version you are going to get. Those who knew us both can evaluate how far I deviate from the truth.

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After attending the 1980 Photographic Society of Southern Africa congress (my third congress) my friend Dirk Vermeulen and I flew from Johannesburg to Upington, rented a car, and drove via sheep trails and dongas across the then relatively roadless northwestern region of South Africa to Aggeneys and Springbok. Three days later, September 18, we booked the last room at the tiny Kamieskroon Hotel (nine rooms, a small dining-room/eetkamer, a large stoep, and a tiny bar at the time.) That night the trajectory of my life would change forever.

We were late for the best of Namaqualand's vast annual display of spring wildflowers, as was a small group from Cape Town that had decided to return home next morning due to the lack of bloom and because one member was unwell. Colla (who had inherited the hotel from her father) took pity on the group and announced that, for the first time in her life, she would show some of her flower slides (in the eetkamer) to people other than her family. I asked if Dirk and I could stay to see them.

Although the subject matter was "beyond the beyond," the slides were "God-awful" and Colla knew it, but she took none of the responsibility, blaming her camera for everything. After the show I returned to my room, found a copy of my book Photography and the Art of Seeing and presented it to Colla, but I did not tell her that I was the author, only that I felt this book might help her with her difficulties.

She had never seen a book or even a magazine on photography before and, as I was soon to learn, started reading it immediately, using a torch/flashlight after the hotel generator was switched off at 10 p.m. About two o'clock in the morning, Colla suddenly "smelled a rat" and using her torch went to the office in her "baby doll" pajamas to check the list of registered guests. Sure enough, one of the persons in room #9 was the author of the book.

Next morning as I was quietly eating breakfast, the eetkamer door suddenly flew open and Colla burst in, pointing an accusing finger directly at me and saying "You're a professional photographer, and you sat through my slide show last night, and I am mortified! However, I've cancelled everything I have to do and if you can stay for two more days, and teach me all you can teach me, I'll show you the best wildflowers left in Namaqualand this year."

I replied, "It's a deal."

The following year I was sitting quietly at home when a telegram arrived, "Flowers excellent, come at once. Colla Swart." Although I had less than $10,000 to my name at the time, I knew I had to go, even though I could get only a business class ticket on such short notice. I had never done anything so rash in my entire life. On the flight from New York to Cape Town I shared the business-class cabin with the entire Osmond family. Little Donny was playing tiddlywinks across the aisle from me.

I stayed in the Kamieskroon Hotel for three weeks, realized that it was a perfect place for photographic workshops, so invited Colla and her husband Coenie to visit me in Canada and audit one of my workshops the following year, which they did. The year after that, 1983, Colla (the quickest student I'd ever known) and I began the Namaqualand Photographic Workshops, which continued without break until 2006, by which time Colla was ready to retire. (Colla's daughter Maryna and son-in-law Helmut had assumed ownership of the hotel and enlarged it to 26 rooms well before then and from 2007 through 2019 facilitated for me a March wilderness camping tour to the Namaqualand coast and the mountainous desert of the Richtersveld for groups up to 16 persons.)

How can I describe the incomparable Colla? Born to a semi-nomadic family in Namaqualand, deeply caring for the less fortunate, running a hotel open to all races during the time of apartheid, having an I.Q. higher than the moon yet regularly capable of losing her car keys three or four times a day, a superb photographer and generous teacher, a weaver and embellisher of stories (especially with a good whiskey.) I could go on and on, but here are a few of the things I will never forget.

Although Colla was the first woman in all of Namaqualand to obtain a university degree and worked for a while in the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town, when we first met she was running the hotel, managing a hostel for 150 neglected and orphaned children of colour, teaching English to Afrikaans-speaking children in the local elementary school, and supervising the building of some housing units for the Dutch Reformed Church. Frequently she had so much running through her mind that she would shift direction completely during a sentence, such as "After lunch we're going to visit the brakes of the car need fixing" and "The flowers at the top of somebody misplaced the ostrich eggs." These mental perambulations drove me crazy, but I was always wondering what might come next. Perhaps her greatest "zinger" came one day when she was speaking of something she wanted to do with her husband, Coenie: "Coenie and I have decided," she remarked, "only I haven't told Coenie yet."

Colla was the world's second worst driver. (Her sister Anne was the worst.) One year after picking me up at the Cape Town airport in the family's old green Peugeot, Colla and I had nearly reached Kamieskroon (500 km. to the north) when she turned down a side road, exclaiming that "the flowers are great down here." Well, they weren't. Colla hadn't checked and was just going by how they were most years. After a couple of kilometres she abruptly swung the car into the veld (shrubs, grasses, whatever,) intending to reverse, turn around, and head back the way we had come. However, despite her best efforts, nothing moved. I climbed out, peered under the car, and reported back to Colla that she had managed to balance the Peugeot on a rock and not a single wheel was touching the ground. Taking my life in my hands, I weighed down the rear end by sitting on the boot and, after three or four

energetic gear reversals, Colla managed to relocate us on drivable ground, leaving me dusty, but uninjured.

However, almost from the beginning of my visits Colla insisted that I drive the "bakkie" (the hotel's half-ton truck) on Namaqualand's roads, almost all of which are dirt. Then, when she'd spy an off-road spot she wanted to photograph, she'd say "Oh, drive down there." If I protested, she'd argue strenuously that it would be just fine. Then, as often as not, we'd get mired in wet sand and sometimes spend hours extricating ourselves. When we returned late to the hotel, Colla would promptly announce that Freeman had got the bakkie stuck in the veld. Eventually I gained sufficient courage to say "No!" forcefully and to encourage a short walk instead.

Colla and me *(photos by Willem Oets)*

The spirit of the hotel was "catching" and on many workshops all the participants became infected. We wound up one workshop with three beautiful younger woman and I dancing the can-can on the counter of the hotel bar, they dressed as "femmes fatales" and I in drag, wearing a blue lace dress (borrowed from Colla,) an ostrich egg for one breast and a roll of toilet paper for the other, a pair of Kodiak work boots, and a grey fright wig. The party ran on until Colla's brother firmly closed the bar. Everybody was late for breakfast next morning.

And then there's the time Colla and I buried Bill. Isobel and Bill were a gracious, tall, elderly couple from Cape Town. She was the photographer and Bill followed her by half a metre, like the Duke of Edinburgh followed Queen Elizabeth. They came to several workshops, even two in New Brunswick. However, one day Bill died suddenly on a cruise ship as it was nearing Cape Town. Isabel phoned Colla to say that she wanted to bury Bill's ashes in Namaqualand, "which he loved so much," so she boarded a bus for Kamieskroon, put Bill's ashes in her room closet on arrival, and stayed for three weeks. A few days before the end of her visit, she reminded Colla that "we" (she, Colla, and I) had not buried Bill yet and asked if Colla had a place in mind.

The next day, Sunday, the three of us (me driving the bakkie, Colla giving directions, and Isabel between us clutching Bill in her lap) followed a remote, partly overgrown road to a spot in the bushveld where the Dutch Reformed Church owned a patch of ground, which Colla felt would be a suitable burial site. Alas, a family was having a picnic there, so we drove on until finally another suitable open spot appeared. I suggested that Colla and Isabel have a short walk while I dug a small grave for the urn and gathered some wild flowers to place on

top after Bill had been "planted." Two days later I returned to Canada and didn't hear the rest of the story until the following year.

Just before Isabel returned to Cape Town later that week, she asked Colla if they could drive out to Bill's grave again, as she wanted to say a final goodbye. However, when they arrived at his remote burial site, Bill was gone.

Being unfamiliar with the place, we had buried Bill in the middle of a faint path used by two young children who, every Monday morning, walked several kilometres to school in Kamieskroon and stayed in the school hostel all week. When they came across the little grave, they turned and ran home to tell their parents. The parents took a look at the scene, thought it might be the burial site of an aborted fetus and, being very superstitious, didn't step over it, but took a long, circuitous route to the Kamieskroon police station.

When the local police surveyed the site, they became suspicious that the grave might be a cache of buried diamonds (diamond-smuggling is not uncommon near the Namaqualand coast,) so they called in the diamond police. The diamond police took a look and were worried that the site might be booby-trapped, so they called in the bomb squad. When the bomb squad found no explosives, and the diamond police dug up a burial urn, they handed it over to the local police. However, a teary-eyed Isabel returned to Cape Town without knowing that Bill was now resting in the Kamieskroon police station.

Eventually Colla, using a circuitous route of her own, discovered where Bill was hiding and, a few days later, was able to ring Isabel to tell her that she had found Bill, rescued him from the police, and returned him to Namaqualand soil.

(Photo by Willem Oets)

Coenie, Colla's husband, told me that somebody had once asked him if he'd ever considered divorcing Colla and that he'd replied, "Divorce never, but MURDER!" Coenie had a subtle, yet often compelling sense of humour that I always appreciated and I spent many good hours chatting with him in the "winkel," the shop next to the hotel, where a person could buy a range of groceries, basic household items, and little bottles of plant-based medicines that protected a person from various maladies, such as sniffles, nausea, and "winds."

Colla cared deeply about people who were disadvantaged or suffering, especially children, and particularly those who had not caused their own misfortune. Often we went up the mountain pass to the village of Nourivier to photograph the fields of flowers, but ended up in the village itself photographing the children, who quickly gathered when they realized the vehicle did not belong to anybody in the village. Colla always loaded a bag of nartjies (Mandarin oranges or Clementines) in the bakkie to hand out as treats, never, never candy, and she always had something special tucked away for one child who obviously suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome. It was very important to her that he feel loved.

One night when Colla and I returned to the hotel after dark, two little boys from the hostel she managed rushed out of the bushes when we parked the bakkie and headed straight for Colla. Both were crying. Colla just wrapped her big coat around them and let them feel her warmth before she asked what the matter was. When she heard and confirmed by examination that the headmaster had beaten the boys around their genitals with a rubber hose, she told me we were skipping dinner and asked me to drive her and them immediately to the Garies police station and a doctor 40 kilometres away. She had the headmaster fired.

Although nobody in the South African National Parks service now knows anything about her efforts, Colla was a prime mover in establishing Namaqua National Park. The story is too long for me to tell here, but if Colla had not found and encouraged the purchase of the first land to be set aside, it would never have become the huge park it is today.

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Let me repeat: I last saw Colla at her frail-care home in Piketberg in late February this year and realized as Helmut and I drove away that I had probably seen her for the last time. So her death did not come as a shock to me, nor even as a surprise, but I wept when I received the news, because Colla was like a dear sister. We challenged each other, dared each other, fought with each other, learned from each other, and loved each other.

Our last visit (photo by Helmut Kohrs)

My first home is Atlantic Canada, my second home is Namaqualand. So far I have been there 45 times, which collectively amounts to about eight years of my life. Colla and our love of the wild flowers is why it began, but only a part of why it endured. I will return as long as I can, because Maryna and Helmut, who are family to me, and the flowers are still there.

I am proundly grateful – to Colla and Coenie, to Maryna and Helmut, and to the hundreds of South Africans and the many others from around the world that I have come to know because of that fateful night in the Kamieskroon Hotel.

Baie dankie, almal!

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To view more photographs click [COLLA and NAMAQUALAND](#).

BOOKS

Even as spring here has glided seamlessly into summer, the busiest time of my year, I've had a couple of books on my kitchen hutch and most days have been able to relax into my comfortable "reading chair" for a few minutes. The two books I'm currently reading (and don't need to complete before recommending them highly) are Yuval Noah Harari's HOMO DEUS: A Brief History of Tomorrow and Randolph Loney's A DREAM OF THE TATTERED MAN: Stories from Georgia's Death Row.

I recommended Harari's SAPIENS: A Brief History of Humankind in my January periodical letter (#29) not only for it scholarship, but also for its ease of reading. HOMO DEUS, which literally translates as "Humans as God," is just as remarkable for its range and quality of research and for its readability, *The Times* describes it perfectly: "Harari can write. Not in the sense that most authors can … but really, really write, with wit, clarity, elegance, and a wonderful eye for metaphor." The book is virtually "non-downputable." The only reason I haven't completed it and started re-reading certain chapters is because I've been working outdoors several hours a day since early April.

Here is the publisher's short quote about its contents from the outside back cover of my paperback edition Of HOMO DEUS. "War is obsolete; you are more likely to commit suicide than to be killed in conflict. Famine is disappearing; you are more at risk of obesity than starvation. Death is just a technical problem; equality is out – but immortality is in. What does our future hold? This is the next stage of evolution. This is HOMO DEUS."

I probably would not be reading A DREAM OF THE TATTERED MAN: Stories from Georgia's Death Row if I had not met the author, Randolph Loney. He came along to France with his lovely wife Renner when I was teaching In Claude Monet's garden and we chatted occasionally over dinner. However, I came to know Randy much better when he and Renner travelled with me in Israel and Jordan this past January (see my letter #30, March 2023) and we will be together for the third time when you receive this letter, as he is participating in this year's INSCAPE workshop.

Here are a few excerpts from the book's *Foreword* by Will Campbell.

"Without stipend he (Randy) goes to death row, where he visits, listens, hopes, or just sits. Outside the cell he waits with the families and loved ones of those appointed to die. His is not a message of believing this or that creed, affiliating with this or that denomination. His mission is to *be with.* And when the state has done all it can do to its captives, he and his colleagues bury them.

"The book's focus is not on what Randy Loney has done. He is too humble a man for that. You will read of the impact made on him by the condemned, who come fully into our view. And you learn of their often terrifying childhood odysseys that had such disastrous consequences…. Also, there for eyes that will see and ears that will hear is a witness to the grace that overcomes our own fallenness as well as that of our sisters and brothers on what we call death row."

This is a book about love and caring.

GARDENING

This spring I planted another 100 rhododendrons and I have the jeans to prove it.

To see photographs of my gardens this year, click WHY I GARDEN.

Recently I've received several e-mail letters from friends in the southern hemisphere – from South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia – many of them reporting on their winter, which is more or less like late October or early November at Shamper's Bluff. My envy knows no limits, because all of them can garden and ride a motorcycle all year long, if they choose.

I can't explain why I need plants growing and feel such deprivation when my world is buried in snow and why finding a couple of blades of green grass in late March puts me over the moon. Most of the "nature" photographs I've made during my life have been of plants – from vast expanses to close-up images – not of animals. There has to be a psychological explanation. Or, perhaps this need for green things growing is highly symbolic.

One of the things we often discuss in INSCAPE and sometimes in other workshops is the strong parallel between the symbols in the art we create and the symbols in our dreams. (Anthony Stevens examines the parallel in his PRIVATE MYTHS.) Both of these are worth exploring for the simple reason that nobody else creates our art and nobody else dreams our dreams. Every piece of art we create – a photograph, a garden, a poem, a song – says something about us. It tells our story. The same goes for dreams – my dreams are an expression of my story and yours an expression of yours.

So, does a person living in New Zealand's sub-tropical North Island, where winter may be a few frosty nights, experience the powerful sense of release that I feel every year when winter finally lets go? What is the psychological impact of the climate in which you live? And, how does it influence the art you create?

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"Climate is a major factor in the shaping of a culture" *Anonymous*

"When the well is dry, we know the worth of water." *Benjamin Franklin*

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NOTE WELL : You'll receive my next periodical letter in October, not September.

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Mon meilleur à tous! Gaan goed, almal! Best to all!

FREEMAN

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