

Chapter 16 – New Horizons

Mid-February 1970 saw Rhodesia convert to decimal currency, and two weeks later, in early March, the country became a republic, and adopted the metric system of measurement. For most Rhodesians, the republic had less practical impact than the other two changes. Rhodesia had been acting as a de facto republic since the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), and the transition to the new republic passed with little fanfare.

At Judge Bailey's dinner parties, animated debate continued over the republic question. Perhaps it was unsurprising, given they were gatherings of members of the legal fraternity. Stanford and Norah followed the discussions with interest, nodding or shaking their heads according to the flow of the debates.

One doesn't notice how fast time passes until one's children go to school. Before Norah knew it, John was coming to the end of his standard four school year, with only one year remaining at junior school. He excelled at his studies, coming first in his exams, and captained both the cricket and soccer teams. His school reports lauded his ability, and at the parent teacher's meeting, which Norah and Stanford attended, the teacher described John as gifted.

Judge Barclay took a keen interest in John's progress and even phoned the headmaster to discuss his prospects. The headmaster assured him John was a top student on a par with any in his experience. From the time John arrived at his residence, Judge Barclay encouraged him to improve himself in every way possible, so he took a proprietary interest in the boy's welfare.

'Norah, do you appreciate how clever John is?'

'Yes, Sir. He gets good reports.'

'Indeed, he does. His headmaster tells me John is one of the brightest pupils he's encountered in his thirty-year career in teaching. What a waste it would be if he didn't attend a top high school to round out his education. This country is going to need well-educated young Africans one day.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'If you're agreeable, I thought I would speak to my old school in England to see if they would accept John as a pupil.'

'Sir, how could that be? Won't it be too expensive?'

'Don't worry about the expense, Norah. I will take care of that. I have kept up my contact with my old school, so there is every chance they would give me favourable consideration regarding John. Would you like me to talk to them about him?'

'If you think so, Sir. Thank you, Sir.'

High school in England? What would that entail? Norah was ambivalent about the idea and later flicked through the atlas in the boss's library in the lounge. Geography was not her focus at the mission school. English and mathematics were her forte. She knew England was far away in Europe, and now it held her attention.

England's map held no meaning for her, so she turned instead to the world map, where she got a shock when she found England. Rhodesia lay at the southern end of Africa, and England at the northern edge of Europe. Two seas and the European continent lay between them, never

mind the length of Africa. The thought of being separated from John by such a vast distance alarmed her.

Time passed, and the boss said nothing more about John studying in England. Perhaps he'd forgotten all about it. Norah was not too concerned if he'd forgotten, as that would mean John would stay at home with her. But she moved him to Salisbury to give him a better chance in life. Perhaps going to school in England would be best for him. What to do? Norah spent many sleepless nights worrying about it.

After dinner one evening, the boss called Norah to the lounge. 'Norah, I have good news. The headmaster at my old school in England said they will accept John. Because I'm an old boy, they'll find a place for him on my recommendation. Of course, we'll have to get his school to send over his academic records, but that's only a formality.'

'Yes, Sir. Good news.'

'The school is a public school and will provide John with great advantage for his future.'

'Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.'

Norah was pleased, but concerned about how she would manage without John being around. She believed in sharing worries and doubts, so she went to find Stanford.

'The boss said it's a good school, even though it's a public school. I thought the boss would have gone to a private school. I read in the paper that private schools have smaller classes, and the pupils get more personal attention.'

'Norah, the boss is a judge, an important man. His school must have been a good school, otherwise he wouldn't hold such a position. And you know, private schools are expensive, costing a lot of money.'

Sometimes, after dinner, and if he was in a chatty mood, Judge Barclay would share a port with his butler, and inevitably, all the staff gossip would reach the judge's ears. Following one of these chats, the boss once again summoned Norah to the lounge after dinner one evening.

'Norah, in England, they use the term "public schools" to describe exclusive private schools. It's the opposite of Rhodesia.'

'Oh! Then isn't that expensive, Sir?'

'Norah, didn't I tell you not to worry about that?'

'But if John goes to England, Sir, I will never see him.'

'He'll come home for two weeks over Christmas and six weeks in the July–August holidays. The school year starts in September, so John will miss his last term at the school here.'

The boss's last comment came as an unpleasant surprise for Norah. She expected one more year of John at junior school, but now it was just two more terms. Faced with a deadline she'd rather avoid, the weeks seemed to race. The boss planned everything in the tiniest detail. With his own boarding school experience, he knew what items John needed to pack.

Norah's efforts to slow time down didn't work, and she felt like she was in a flood of days racing past, sweeping her along. She felt helpless, reminding her of the time Betty Dimba fell into the river near the village at the height of the rainy season. The raging torrent swept her along and out of sight. No one could help her, and it was two weeks before they found her body miles downstream.

As usual, Norah and John visited the village for their Christmas break. Like Norah, Tadiwa was ambivalent about John going to school in England. 'He'll come back thinking

he's an Englishman. What if he likes it and stays there? Your boss has taken control of your son away from you.'

'No, my boss always asks for my approval for any decision about John.'

'Yes, but your boss is a judge. He's a clever man. He lets you think you are deciding for John, but he is in charge.'

'It is what is best for John, and it doesn't matter whose idea it is.'

Tadiwa's attempts to give Norah second thoughts didn't work the way she intended. Her comments made Norah even more determined to give John every advantage possible for his future success.

John gave little thought to his move to England as September seemed far away. Before then, the April and August school holidays lay ahead. But the Christmas holiday raced by, and soon, he faced the start of his last year in junior school. For him, the sense of speeding time intensified because of his looming relocation to school in England, a prospect he didn't relish.

The April school holiday passed in a blur, and the weeks of the second term showed no signs of slowing down. Soon, John's last days at his junior school approached, and he realised his life would change at the end of the August school holiday, a few weeks hence. It came up so fast. Now, each morning, his waking thought was how much he'd miss Aneni and his life in Salisbury. The August school holiday would be shorter than the usual three weeks because of his overseas travel arrangements.

Things hit home when John handed over the captaincy of the school cricket and soccer teams and said goodbye to his school friends. His class master and headmaster shook his hand and wished him luck in his future endeavours.

Driving with Mortimer on his way to the village, John and Norah were pensive. Mortimer tried to get John chatting, but he kept falling back into periods of silence.

'I will collect you and your mama in two weeks from now,' said Mortimer.

'Are you also taking us back to Salisbury? What about the petrol?' said John.

Mortimer laughed. 'Petrol rationing ended in May. It's not a problem now. No more scrounging for coupons.'

At the village, Tadiwa, Aneni, and his friends welcomed him with cheerful smiles and laughter, but somehow, it made things worse as it highlighted what he'd be leaving behind.

Simba, Takunda, and Chipu tried to cheer John by pointing out he'd still be back for Christmas.

'Yes, but for less than two weeks. The travel will take away time.'

John's words struck Aneni like a slap. They were all beginning to realise the full significance of his move to school in England, but it hit Aneni the hardest.

'Will you write to me?'

'I will write something every day, and post you a letter once a week.'

'Have you got the beer hall address?'

'Mum has, so she'll give it to me.'

John realised the boys wouldn't miss him much because they played together, but they didn't include Aneni. In his absence, Aneni cared for the village toddlers when she returned home from school.

Later, John spoke to his mum. 'Why can't Aneni go to school in Salisbury? While I'm in England, she could stay with you.'

‘Do you believe Tadiwa would let her go to Salisbury? She didn’t even want you going to Salisbury. Tadiwa wouldn’t agree with Aneni going there.’

‘When we’re married, I’ll take Aneni to Salisbury.’

‘When you’re married, you two can do what you want.’

The night before leaving the village, Norah and John sat with Tadiwa and Aneni, watching the fire’s flickering embers. John’s pending departure muddled his thoughts, making it difficult for him to convey his emotions to Aneni. His mind raced, and he couldn’t find the words. Most of the time, they sat in silence, gazing at the fire’s dying glow. It was not the way he imagined his August school holiday ending.

With the other villagers asleep in bed, it was quiet. The waning moon seemed to appreciate the subdued mood of the little group, but a myriad of stars shone above, as if promising a bright future.

The next morning, John’s friends were off exploring the area, but he didn’t join them. He wanted to stay in the village with Aneni.

‘I’ll be back at Christmas, and in August for at least five weeks.’ John was trying his best to make the situation sound as positive as possible, but his words didn’t convince him and probably didn’t make it any easier for Aneni. ‘I won’t be away forever. When I finish my studies, I’ll come back for you, and we can get married.’ Those words did cheer Aneni a little.

Mortimer, always dependable, arrived on time to chauffeur Norah and John to Salisbury. John’s friends were still exploring the bush, leaving only Aneni and Tadiwa to say goodbye. John squeezed Aneni’s hand before stepping into the Bentley. He’d seen the glint in her eyes, and wiped his own eyes as the car drove away.

In Salisbury, the last two days before John’s London flight were a whirl of activity. The boss handled most things, but a few small matters required attention. John needed to select a book for the plane and remember to pack lip balm, a new tube of toothpaste, and a tin of Zam-Buck. As he packed, he remembered other items he might need.

The night before his departure, Judge Barclay summoned John to the lounge.

‘Now young man, are you packed and ready?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Do you have your passport, plane tickets, and money in a safe place?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘When you reach Heathrow Airport in London, keep an eye out for a man holding a sign bearing your name. He’ll be waiting for you after you pass through immigration and customs, and will drive you to the school. When you get there, hand the letter I gave you to Mr Bromley, the headmaster. He will most likely pass you on to the house matron, who has your school uniform waiting for you.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Now remember, at the school, you represent not only yourself but also your mother and me. I recommended you to the headmaster, so my reputation is in your hands, John. Study hard and be a credit to us.’

‘Yes, Sir. I will.’

‘Good lad! Tomorrow, I will be in court all day, so I’ll say goodbye now.’

‘Goodbye, Sir. Thank you, Sir.’

The boss shook John’s hand. ‘Good luck, John. We’ll see you at Christmas.’

The next morning, John was up early. He paced the room before walking around the backyard, and taking several trips into the house to hang around Stanford or his mother and chat with Abigail, the housemaid. He’d packed and had nothing more to do.

In the early afternoon, he chatted with Philemon, who’d come in early to make a simple farewell lunch, which they all enjoyed in the shade under Stanford’s veranda. The adults gave John last minute tips, though none of them ever experienced travel abroad. But advice like holding onto your suitcase and being wary of strangers applies to all journeys, long or short.

At four o’clock, Mortimer, the driver, arrived to take John and Norah to the airport. John was on an early evening flight to Johannesburg to connect with the flight to London. Stanford, Philemon, and Thomas, the gardener, waved him goodbye as Mortimer eased the Bentley out of the driveway.

On the way to the airport, Norah held John’s hand. The traffic wasn’t too heavy, and the drive took only fifteen minutes. Mortimer parked the car and accompanied John and Norah into the terminal. Soon after John checked in his suitcase, a flight attendant came to guide him through immigration and customs.

There was no time for chit-chat. Norah hugged John and kissed him on his cheek, a lump rising in her throat. She and Mortimer hurried upstairs to the balcony to wait for John to walk out to the Vickers Viscount plane waiting on the apron.

Twenty minutes later, the first passengers walked across the tarmac to the plane, and soon John, accompanied by the flight attendant, appeared beneath them. Norah shouted out and waved to get his attention. He looked up and gave a sheepish half wave back. He climbed the steps and at the top, turned and waved before disappearing into the plane’s doorway.

It was Norah’s first visit to the airport, and her first close view of an aeroplane. To her, the plane’s doorway looked like a monster’s gaping mouth, swallowing the passengers. She scanned the plane’s windows, unable to find John among the distant passengers. Perhaps his seat was on the plane’s far side.

The noise of the engine starting alarmed Norah. She and Mortimer watched the plane trundle out to the runway. She prayed the plane was safe, holding her breath as it picked up speed and hurtled down the runway. Suddenly it was in the air, climbing as it flew away from the airport. Norah watched the plane until it was a tiny speck above the horizon. Then, unsure, she wondered if the speck was still there or a mere illusion. All that remained was the faint smell of kerosene from the plane’s fuel.