

Chapter 17 – England

The Viscount taxied to the runway, where it turned and waited. Soon it eased forward, getting faster and faster before lifting into the air. John tried to find his mother and Mortimer amongst the people crowded on the terminal's balcony. He thought he glimpsed them in the distance, but couldn't be sure.

From his window seat, John looked at the view. Below was the fuel storage depot and several unidentifiable buildings. Leaving the city behind, John shifted his attention to the other passengers, mostly businessmen dressed in dark suits. Soon the air in the cabin was heavy with cigarette smoke.

The air hostess pushing a trolley with tea, coffee, and alcoholic drinks caught his eye. When she came to his row, John ordered tea and sandwiches. He'd eaten a satisfying lunch but wasn't about to refuse refreshments on the plane.

It was a short flight of less than two hours, and soon the massed buildings of Johannesburg came into view. The size of the city and the tall downtown buildings held John's interest. Far below, the cars crawled like ants on the roads. An announcement to fasten seat belts came over the intercom, and the clicking sound of passengers complying with the instruction filled the cabin.

The Viscount made a gentle landing, needing only a short part of the runway before it slowed and turned to taxi towards the terminal. The plane stopped and the fasten seatbelt sign switched off before a scramble of passengers hurried to take their belongings from the overhead locker and queue to disembark. Soon, the passengers all filed out of the aisle and descended the steps. John was the last one to leave the plane. At the bottom of the steps, a South African Airways hostess waited to lead him to his connecting flight to London.

An hour later, waiting at the crowded boarding gate, John heard his flight called. The air hostess came and collected his boarding card and escorted him to the plane, where another hostess pointed out his window seat. The plane, a Boeing 707, was much larger than the Viscount, and John watched as a steady stream of passengers entered the plane and searched for their seats.

When everyone was seated, an air hostess walked down the aisle, checking that the overhead lockers were closed. The plane began its taxi to the runway while an air steward demonstrated the safety procedures. When he finished the demonstration, John studied the air safety card, reading the instructions several times.

Now, the plane stood motionless, waiting for clearance to take off. The engine noise was building until it sounded like it might explode. The plane advanced, slowly at first, picking up speed as it hurtled down the runway. John felt the exhilarating moment the plane lifted into the air.

It was dark outside, and from his window seat, John admired the lights of the city. The streams of cars with their yellow headlights or red brake lights presented a compelling spectacle. Green, orange, and red traffic lights added to the colourful scene. The lights of the suburbs and distant CBD seemed to stretch to the horizon.

The fasten seat belt sign switched off and an air hostess came pushing a trolley down the aisle. When she reached John's row, she asked the man seated next to him what he'd like to

drink. He asked for a Castle Lager. The hostess handed him a paper napkin, a plastic glass, and a can of beer. When she asked John what he'd like, he also asked for a beer. The hostess raised her eyebrows and handed him a paper napkin, a plastic glass, and a can of ginger beer.

Soon the dinner trolley came down the aisle. The food wasn't up to Philemon's high standards, but John was hungry and ate everything on his tray. He found the short flight from Johannesburg to Luanda a novelty, and the time soon passed. Passengers flying on to London could not disembark during the brief stop.

Earlier, John introduced himself to his fellow passenger in the aisle seat, but the man did not appear to want to chat. Soon after leaving Luanda, the fasten seatbelt sign turned off, and the man left his seat and walked down the aisle. John assumed he was heading for the toilet, but he didn't return. Then he noticed the man sitting in another seat several rows away. John was pleased with the extra room it gave him, and he lifted the arm rests and made himself comfortable.

The hum of the engines proved soporific, and John slept for most of the seven-hour leg to Las Palmas. The early morning sun shining through the window woke him. He joined the toilet queue before it got too long and returned to his seat to enjoy the panoramic views of the Atlantic Ocean. There was a flurry of activity as the hostesses served breakfast to the travel-worn passengers.

As the plane approached Europe, heavy clouds hid the first sight of land, allowing only occasional ground views. Eventually, the plane slowed, breaking through the clouds as the fasten seatbelt sign came on with an audible chime. At last, the long flight was ending.

The plane made a soft landing at London's Heathrow Airport, but the taxiing to the terminal seemed never-ending. The minute the plane stopped and the fasten seatbelt sign switched off, the passengers rushed to get down their overhead luggage and queue in the aisle to disembark. John saw no point in joining them, just to stand and wait for the plane doors to open.

John entered the terminal, where an air hostess directed him to the immigration counters. Here, he presented his British passport, which Judge Barclay somehow got for him despite the international sanctions facing most Rhodesians. He also needed to show the immigration officer the letter from the school, confirming his enrolment. The officer stamped his passport and let him pass, and in customs, an officer searched through his suitcase before letting him through to the arrivals hall.

As he entered the arrivals hall, John scanned the assembled crowd, looking for his name on one of the several boards, greeting the passengers. Then, at the end of the row, he saw a board bearing the name Mr Ziyambi. He'd not been called Mr before, but he presumed it must be for him because he'd seen no other black people on his flight. He approached the middle-aged man holding the board.

'Master Ziyambi, I presume. Welcome to England, Sir. My name is Arthur.'

Sir? First Mr, then master, and now, sir. What sort of country was this?

John shook the man's hand. 'Pleased to meet you, Arthur.'

'Here, let me take your suitcase. The taxi is this way.'

John found his greeting strange. Everything here seemed upside down. He couldn't imagine a white man carrying his suitcase in Rhodesia, unless it was too heavy for him to lift.

The driver put John's suitcase in the boot and opened a backdoor for him to enter the taxi.

‘Do you know where to take me?’

‘My instructions are to take you to your boarding house, where the matron, Mrs Daniels, will see to you.’

‘Is the school far?’

‘About an hour and a quarter drive to West Sussex, Sir.’

West Sussex, so that’s where they were going?

After leaving the airport, the taxi driver kept up a running commentary about the buildings and sites on their route. The passing scene enthralled John. The narrow streets and the country towns and villages held a charm, despite the heavy grey clouds and damp roads with their smell of rotting leaves.

All too soon, the taxi driver slowed the vehicle and turned through huge, ornate wrought-iron gates onto an impressive property with a wide green field fronting a large historical-looking building. It reminded John of the pictures in his school history books. The driver was familiar with the school and drove straight to the building’s rear to a flight of steps leading to a studded, heavy wooden door.

‘Here you are, Sir. Go up those steps and ask for Mrs Daniels, the house matron. She’ll look after you.’

The driver jumped out and took John’s suitcase out of the boot and handed it to him.

‘Well, goodbye, Sir, and good luck. No doubt, I’ll be seeing you again from time to time.’

John ascended the steps to the building with mixed feelings. He wasn’t sure he wanted it to be his home for the next six years. It was a dismal thought for him as he passed through the doorway.

A small group of boys stood in the hallway, chatting.

John interrupted them. ‘Excuse me, do you know where I can find Mrs Daniels?’

‘I’ll show you,’ one boy volunteered. ‘I’m Parker, by the way.’

‘Pleased to meet you. I’m John.’

‘What’s your surname? No one uses first names around here.’

‘Ziyambi.’

‘Oh! That’s a new one. Is your father a chief or prince?’

‘No, why do you say that?’

‘There’s only one other black fellow here, Adewale, in the fourth form. He’s from West Africa. Apparently, he and his father are both princes, or so he says. So, what does your father do?’

John wasn’t sure how to answer that question. He’d never met his father and had no idea what he did, or if he was alive. He needed to say something. ‘My father is a judge.’

‘A judge or a magistrate?’

‘No, a judge. Sometimes he hangs people.’

‘You mean he’s a hangman?’

‘No, I don’t mean he actually hangs people. He sentences them to be hanged.’

‘Here we are. Mrs Daniels’s office.’

Parker knocked on the door, and a mature, matronly woman opened it.

‘Mrs Daniels, Ziyambi is here to see you.’

‘Thank you, Parker. Run along now.’

Mrs Daniels turned to John. 'Come in, young man. I have some items waiting here for you. I trust everything will fit. Your tailor in Salisbury sent through your measurements, so they should be OK.' Mrs Daniels handed him two large parcels wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. 'These are yours. Follow me, and I'll show you to your dormitory. Your bed is B10, right at the end on the window side.'

John followed Mrs Daniels up a flight of stairs to the first floor. 'This is it. B dormitory. After you have changed into your school uniform, come back to my office, and I'll take you to meet the headmaster. You must wear your grey shorts, tie, and blazer. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Mrs Daniels, if you please. I haven't been a miss for thirty years.'

John entered the dormitory and found his bed, B10. He opened the parcels to find a complete wardrobe, including black leather shoes. John changed into the uniform, but the tie was a problem. He'd never worn a tie in his life. He stood in front of the mirror with the tie draped around his neck. Just then, another boy entered the dormitory.

'Hello! I'm Ponsonby. Who are you?'

'Ziyambi. Pleased to meet you.' John noticed Ponsonby was wearing a tie. 'Must we always wear a tie here?'

'Only during school hours. I'm wearing a tie because I had to meet the headmaster.'

'I must also meet him. Can you please show me how to do the tie?'

'Goodness! You don't know how to knot a tie?'

'We never wore ties in my last school.'

Ponsonby showed him how to do his tie, and after a few attempts, John managed it. He hurried down to Matron Daniels's office.

'Ah! There you are, Ziyambi. You took your time. Come, follow me.'

Mrs Daniels led John through a long passage leading to the front of the building. She stopped and knocked on a heavy wooden door close to the main entrance. A voice from inside called out, 'Come!'

Mrs Daniels opened the door. 'Headmaster, young Ziyambi is here to see you.'

'Thank you, Mrs Daniels. Come in, Ziyambi.'

John edged into the large office.

'Come on, Ziyambi, step to it. We don't tiptoe around here.'

'Yes, Sir. I have this letter for you, Sir.'

'Ah, yes! A letter from my old friend, Hugh Barclay. We were classmates at this school, you know?'

'No, Sir, he never said.'

'Because your benefactor is my friend doesn't mean you'll get special treatment, Ziyambi.'

'Benefactor, Sir?'

'He's your sponsor, isn't he? He's paying for you.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'You'll have to prove your worth. We're all treated the same here.'

Later, in the dormitory, John met a few of the other pupils in his class, including Mansell and Fellowes, who occupied the beds next to him. Parker introduced him to the others.

'Ziyambi's father is a hanging judge.'

The others all gathered round to hear about John's father.

'I wouldn't call him a hanging judge. It's just that he has the power to pass a death sentence on bad people.'

'Do you ever see them?' said Ponsonby.

'The bad people? No, of course not.'

'Stop teasing him, guys. We were new boys once,' said Mansell.

'So, what does your father do, Parker?' John enquired, turning the conversation away from himself.

'My father is a major-general in the army. Fellowes' father is a big deal in the Foreign Office, and Mansell's dad is an industrialist. One of his companies makes our school uniforms.'

'What about you, Ponsonby?' John asked.

'He's an investor. He makes his money on the stock exchange.'

'Ponsonby's dad is Sir Rupert Ponsonby,' Parker added.

'Are there only ten of us in our class?' John asked.

'No, there's also ten in dormitory A,' said Fellowes.

Someone shouted, 'Look out! The prince is coming.'

A big, heavily built African boy entered the dormitory.

It was the legendary Adewale. He cast around before focusing on John. 'You, boy, come to my dorm after dinner and collect my shoes. They need polishing.'

Adewale turned and walked out of the dormitory, leaving the first form boys silent.

'I'm not polishing his shoes. Why should I? Do I have to?'

'You only have to fag for someone in the sixth form, but sometimes, fourth formers try their luck. We don't want to get bashed, so sometimes we fag for a fourth former, depending on who it is.'

At dinner in the large hall with rows of long tables and benches, John enjoyed his meal. He hadn't realised how hungry he was, having arrived at the school after lunch. Later, in the dormitory, the others asked him if he was going to collect Adewale's shoes.

'No, he's not a sixth former.'

Just then, an angry Adewale stamped into the room and glared at John. 'You, boy, why didn't you collect my shoes?' He threw the shoes at John. 'Make sure they're good and shiny, and bring them to my room when they're done.'

John picked up the shoes on his bed and tossed them through the open window. 'They're done.'

'You impudent shrimp. Meet me at the gym at break time tomorrow. I'm going to give you a damned good thrashing.'

The incident stunned the other boys. They couldn't believe John's calm demeanour. 'Aren't you scared? Even some seniors won't cross him. He'll give you a good hiding.'

'Why must I meet him at the gym?'

'You can get expelled for fighting on the grounds,' said Parker. 'The gym master will referee your fight.'

'Why did you antagonise that guy?' said Ponsonby. 'Our dorm will be in for it now.'