

## GRAYS, ESSEX

In England, we would stay with my mother's oldest sister, husband, and two sons in their semi-detached house in Grays, Essex. Two more cousins! That sounded OK!

Soon after, my grandparents also returned from Rhodesia and joined the household. Upstairs, my aunt, uncle, and two cousins occupied the two bedrooms, so my mother and I moved into the tiny box room. Given the period and the climate, the single upstairs bathroom wasn't too big a problem.

When my grandparents arrived, they moved into the downstairs front room, the brightest and best room in the house. Also downstairs was the kitchen, and dining, come family room. Under the staircase stood the gas meter, hungry for shillings to keep the cooking and heating going. The outside toilet was not best suited to an English winter. Anyone familiar with British housing in the 1950s would know what I'm talking about.

I restarted my education at the quaint South Stifford Board School, which stood at the end of a country lane. The school provided the pupils a bottle of milk at playtime and a cooked lunch. At lunch, we'd all sit on long benches at trellis tables. Often, a handful of places gleamed with new cutlery, so each day became a race to claim a seat blessed with the sparkling implements. To make sure you kept possession of the new cutlery, you would lick it to discourage poachers.

In Rhodesia, the school kids called me a *chum*, but now in England, they called me an African. For a brief spell, I was an outsider in both countries.

Varnished wooden pens with scratchy replaceable nibs, and inkpots in the desk's corner, proved to be a messy experience. In Queens Park East, learning to read felt like a game and words flowed, but I recall the first word in school I didn't recognise. I asked the teacher, and she explained to me what the word, *us*, meant.

In year two, they used rote learning to teach us the multiplication tables up to twelve times twelve. I can still hear the class's rhythmic chant of the multiplication tables and believe it's the best way to gain that skill, and much quicker than using a calculator. In that same year, they also taught us how to knit. Talk about an all-round education!

The school boasted a small, tarred playground, with no sporting facilities. Occasionally, we played cricket there in the last period on Friday. My first ever strike of the ball raced to the delineated boundary. A pleasing shot, but I didn't realise I was holding the cricket bat back to front, and nobody, including me, had any idea where the ball would go.

After school, the only organised sport was soccer on a public playing field near the shops on the London Road. I still have my brown leather Stanley Matthews football boots somewhere.

One day, a teacher caught the toughest boy in the school smoking behind the bicycle shed (name withheld). The thin elderly headmistress called a school assembly to witness his punishment. He burst into tears when she asked him to hold out his hand, palm up. The headmistress only held a light twelve-inch wooden ruler, but it may have been the public nature of his imminent flogging that upset him. Given his distress, and much to everyone's disappointment, the headmistress spared him the expected brutal bashing.

Each school day morning, I'd trudge up Mill Lane to school in the cold and wet, wearing my Wellingtons (gum boots). Opposite the school was a typical English wood, the sort in which young children get murdered. The school warned us not to go there, so I only visited it twice.

One year, I got a new bicycle for Christmas. The road we lived in had a concrete kerb which proved most useful for helping me keep my balance when learning how to ride. One problem was the road's seventeen-year-old bully, who terrorised all the young kids on the street. When he approached me while I was learning to ride, I let him know who my cousins were. After that, he was always friendly.

Once I could ride, I rode to Orsett, which seemed far away. Now, I was ready to travel the world, but I didn't realise Orsett was only six kilometres from Grays.

In those days, the primary use of the street was kids playing games or riding their bicycles. An old Ford Prefect parked outside a house down the road, the only car in sight. Today, cars and vans pack the road, and parking spaces have replaced front gardens, which means most of the low garden walls have gone. It's not a pretty sight on Google Street View.

Christmas Eve always kicked off the family celebrations. While the adults packed presents on the dining room table, an uncle would take us kids upstairs to my aunt's bedroom to scare us with his ghost stories. His time spent working as a guard on the Indian Railways flavoured many of his tales.

We spent Christmas Day unpacking and playing presents and eating a traditional Christmas lunch. The south of England doesn't get much snow, and I never saw a white Christmas, but one year we woke to snow cover on Boxing Day. By evening, it was already getting mushy.

At the bottom of our street on the London Road was a small strip of shops, including an exciting newsagent, come toy shop, where Mum bought her cigarettes. But for more excitement, we needed to catch the bus into town, where we could buy milkshakes, rationed sweets and meat, more toys, and clothing from Marks and Spencers. Mum bought me toffee-brown slip-ons known as monk shoes. They became my regular footwear.

My doctor's surgery was also in Grays, as well as two cinemas, The State and The Regal. Among the stars were Bob Hope, Dean Martin, and Jerry Lewis, and the more glamorous Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe. The State showed Dumbo and Bambi, and The Regal showed lots of cowboy movies.

After the movie one afternoon, walking down the alley beside The State Cinema, I found a small bat struggling on the ground. I picked it up and threw it in the air, and it flew off without difficulty.

Each week, my cousins got the Beano and Dandy comics, so I chose Topper. I began with the very first episode, but sadly, did not keep it. Recently, a copy sold on eBay for £367.89.

Pigeons were popular, and I bought a couple of beauties, a bar and a checker, which flew higher than anyone else's in the immediate area. An elderly gentleman at the top of our neighbouring street was a well-known pigeon fancier. Old Mr Benson was blind in one eye where a pigeon pecked him, mistaking his pupil for a seed. He was the proud owner of a jet-black pigeon, which was renowned for its true colour and legendary flying ability, and I wanted it. I couldn't believe it when he agreed to sell it to me. Talk about living on past glories! All it ever did was sit on its perch. It didn't even want to exit the coop.

I joined the local cub pack, which, among other things, took us on outings in the summer months. We travelled by train to exhibitions in London, and on one forgettable occasion saw *Springtime in the Rockies*. Akela said it was a cowboy show, and we looked forward to it. Imagine our disappointment at seeing a huge stage prop mountain range with endless singing cowboys popping up from behind plywood mountain peaks and rocks. As I recall, no one got shot.

The adults pinned their hopes on Littlewoods Pools, which proved as elusive as the lotteries of today. Newcastle United was the top team, with Arsenal the runner-up. Just as racegoers study form, the pools hopefuls studied the football teams.

Mum worked for the first time in her life at Van Den Berghs & Jurgens on the production line, packing margarine. She didn't like standing all day by the conveyor belt on the chilled production floor, so she took a week's leave and hired a typewriter to teach herself touch typing.

It was a beautiful English summer, and she sat all day with the windows open, typing at the dining table. At the end of the week, she went for an interview and typing test at Bata shoe manufacturers and was successful in getting a job in their typing pool.

Television was in its early days, and most households, including ours, didn't have one. Evenings were spent reading, playing games, checking the football pools, or in the case of my older cousin, doing his homework. My aunt was a good chess player and taught us all how to play. I particularly liked it because it was a great leveller, giving me the opportunity to challenge the adults or try to beat my older cousins. Family evenings were very social back then.

The Queen's Coronation was coming, and my uncle bought a black and white television for the occasion. While waiting for the event, we contented ourselves with Bill and Ben, the Flowerpot Men, and Francis the Talking Mule.

Our street, like so many others in Britain, held a street party with long trellis tables and benches lined up end to end. A community spirit spread throughout the country, with strings of Union Jack flags lining the streets, and tables piled with cool drinks, cakes, and other snacks the residents contributed.

The Coronation was a historic occasion, and we felt obliged to watch the entire proceedings on the tele. By mid-afternoon, I was willing it to finish. The brightest spot was the news about Edmund Hillary and Tiger Tenzing Norgay's conquest of Everest. It seemed like a coronation present for the Queen.

Beautiful English summers don't last long. Mum would leave for work in the cold dark morning and return in the cold dark evening. For someone accustomed to the warmth of India, England was cold, damp, and miserable, and Africa was calling. Rhodesia, the land of sunshine, smiling black faces, and wild animals. I was all for it, particularly the wild animals.

Mum filled my head with ideas of boat trips on the Zambezi, though I'm not sure she'd ever been on one. I'm sure movies like *The African Queen* and Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* must have influenced that dream.

My only concern about leaving was I fancied Akela at the cub pack. Then, I heard she intended to leave the cubs by year-end. Problem solved! Rhodesia, here we come.