

Adventures in Paradise

For two years, my mother and I lived with my aunt's family in a large house set on the rear of a seven-acre block in Willsgrove. The property stood halfway between the Hotel Rio and Waterford, near Bulawayo. I was ten years old and my cousin, Peter, was almost two years older. School holidays in Willsgrove provided us with one adventure after another. Each night we jumped into bed, impatient for the dawn.

The myriad of creatures living on the property kept us enthralled, but that was only one of our many sources of entertainment.

I used to love the summer rain during the long Christmas school holidays. After a torrential downpour, a narrow, fast-moving miniature stream ran for much of the day along the left side of the Hope Fountain Road, down towards the Hotel Rio. This was perfect for racing Mazoe bottle caps, which were a lot like the screw top caps found on wine bottles today. Fortunately, the road wasn't too busy because I needed to watch out for passing cars.

On one of these occasions, I saw a crow flying at a leisurely pace above the trees. A blur, like a missile, streaked towards it. The crow fell like a stone, and the blur, a hawk, circled above before descending to the ground. City kids seldom see nature's dramas, but in the bush, something entertained us most days.

On the property, several young jacaranda trees provided climbing opportunities. I'm not sure what part instinct may have played, but we spent a lot of time in the trees. Peter discovered the joy of hanging from his knees, upside down like a bat, surveying the world from a different point of view. Soon, I joined in to experience the thrill of blood rushing to my head.

Also present on the property were the ubiquitous acacias. Wicked, long, bone-coloured, three-pronged thorns lay scattered on the ground, presenting a trap for unwary tackie-wearing feet. Only once I made that mistake, when a prong broke off, piercing my tackie through to my foot.

Behind the house, the thick bush extended way beyond the limits of our explorations. Over the back fence, we discovered a bird's nest with three tiny chicks, which we often visited to check their progress. Then one afternoon, when we crawled through the fence, we found them all dead and covered with ants. The parents must have abandoned them. Perhaps they'd seen us looking at the chicks and misinterpreted our intentions.

In the early days, before I got my pellet gun, I enjoyed playing cowboys and Indians with my imitation six-shooter. Early one afternoon I found an abandoned, rusted, wheelless old car lying in the bush, far from any road or track. In the movies, the cowboys always smashed the glass to fire from the windows. I tried to smash the driver-side window with the butt of my gun, but car windows are strong, and my six-shooter fell apart.

Another day, on a trek through the thick bush, Peter and I discovered an abandoned house with solid timber beams and a thatched roof. It stood in the middle of nowhere and had no road or track leading to it. The bush grew close, except for a small open patch in front of the house. On each visit, we found fresh blood on the concrete floor. We imagined we'd found a haunted house, where the murder victim returned each night to bleed at the scene of the crime. But one day we disturbed an owl in the rafters. Mystery solved; many a mouse must

have met their end there on the wooden beam overhead. The simple explanation disappointed us.

Further out in the bush, we discovered an isolated dam with no vehicle access, and only paths made by the feet of local Africans. On one occasion, we watched an African man use a stick and a thin string with no hook. As a fish nipped the string, he would flick it onto a small pile of fish on the ground beside him. The man's reaction was faster than the fish's ability to release their grip on the string. I tried it without success.

My fishing days were short-lived. One school holiday, Peter and I fished in the Umgazana, a little stream that fed into Lakeside, a picturesque weekend spot for teas and boating. I caught a small male tilapia in breeding condition. The beautiful red and iridescent green fish soon turned into a dried-out brownish-grey husk. Alive in a river or aquarium, it could have been appreciated.

Lakeside, a lovely picnic spot opposite the Hotel Rio, hired out rowing boats for half-hour turns on the lake. One Sunday afternoon, Peter and I wanted to hire one, but all were in use. The African attendant who collected the money told us a boat would be available within a few minutes.

The time dragged, but finally we saw it coming. On board, four teenagers, two couples aged around fifteen, laughed and giggled. As we walked down to the boat, one girl who wore a flared cream sundress with a dark pink floral print said they wanted another half hour. The African attendant pointed out we'd been waiting for fifteen minutes.

'Let them wait,' she said.

'No, we better let them have it,' said one boy.

'No, why should we?' said the girl. 'They're just stupid little kids. They can wait.'

'It's not fair! It's our turn!' we argued.

The girl bullied the attendant into giving them another half hour. The attendant shrugged and told us to wait.

Ten minutes later, another boat came in, and we hopped on board. Rowing is harder than it looks, and it took us time to make progress. As we reached the centre of the lake, we noticed a disturbance on a nearby boat, with the people on board talking in loud, urgent voices. We rowed closer, before we realised the girl in the cream dress was neck deep in the water, hanging on to the side of the boat. Her soaking hair covered her face as her companions urged her to hold on as they worked their way back to the distant bank.

You can imagine our shouts of triumph.

If the girl who fell overboard at Lakeside ever gets to read this, I'd like her to know although we laughed and laughed, my heart went out to her that afternoon. And if she remembers that sunny Sunday, I was the innocent-looking, fair-haired, stupid little kid.

Most days we were out in the bush with our pellet guns, shooting birds for target practice. Our aim became so accurate, it no longer presented a challenge, and we began to feel guilty about the fate of the poor birds. But later, the experience proved to be handy on the rifle range during my national service at Llewellyn Barracks. On one occasion, we dispatched a cobra that crawled up to the house and hid under a half-barrel planter by the front steps.

Calling ourselves the Terrible Two, we needed more mischief to justify the name. Now, was when we discovered the discreet dark green kiosk just outside our fence on the roadside near the corner of our property. After lunch one warm afternoon, we walked outside our

property along the front fence to the dark green metal kiosk, which before, we'd only seen closed.

Inside the dark green metal kiosk, we found a portly African man selling cool drinks, sweets, meat pies, sandwiches, and cigarettes. Star and Marvel packets of eight cost tuppence. We considered the former to be a more sophisticated smoke and bought a packet. The cigarettes were a novelty, and it took us a fortnight to smoke them. Neither of us smoked, now or then, but it was another tick on our mischiefs list.

Guy Fawkes night was always fun. We would buy whatever small fireworks our pocket money would allow, but my uncle bought the bigger, more impressive ones. We bought bangers, big and small, Catherine wheels, Vesuvius, Roman candles, sparklers, jumping Jacks, and rockets. Peter and a friend of his threw bangers at my feet, so in retaliation, I threw one back. Somehow, the banger didn't go where intended and exploded on Peter's shirt collar. The sizeable hole it produced surprised us and prompted us not to throw any more bangers at each other.

Everyone was reminded of the need for greater safety precautions when handling fireworks. But that wasn't the biggest disaster on that fifth of November. The family looked forward to the giant rocket my uncle bought, anticipating a beautiful late-night finale.

The rocket was too big to launch from a milk bottle, so Peter jammed it into the ground. Earlier, it rained, and the ground was soft. My uncle inspected the rocket and proclaimed it would be dangerous if it fell over and shot towards us, so he pushed it further into the ground. He lit the fuse, and we all held our breath.

The rocket fizzed and shook and struggled valiantly to launch. But it was no use, as the rain-soaked ground held fast while the rocket sprayed its colourful load eighteen inches into the ground. We all stood in stunned silence, and I recall Peter being none too pleased.