

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS – PART ONE

Nothing quite compares to the feeling of having finished the year-end exams with a lazy six-week Christmas break lying ahead. The Form Four O-level exams were over, with an earlier than usual end to the school year, which meant we had a couple of free weeks before Christmas. As normal, I'd nothing planned, but school holidays always worked out, with boredom never an issue.

Many Rhodesians headed for the coast during the summer Christmas holidays. Salisburyites travelled to nearby Beira or Durban, while Bulawayans most often visited the latter, so I was interested when my school friend Peter came up with a compelling idea.

The Saturday morning after school ended, he turned up at my flat and suggested we should hitchhike to Durban. Friends of his parents lived there, and they'd invited him to visit and bring a friend. The idea intrigued me. I'd never hitchhiked, let alone taken on an uncertain trip to a city over eight hundred and eighty miles distant.

Mum didn't object, leaving me to decide for myself. On a previous occasion, I'd visited Durban with my father, Aunt Doreen, and Stephen, and I was eager to go again. So, I agreed, provided we were back in Bulawayo the day before Christmas Eve.

'Yes, that won't be a problem.'

His confident assurance did not convince me. I worried we might be stuck somewhere on the road for several days, but the sense of adventure was irresistible. My snap decision meant little time for planning. I filled my suitcase with what I thought I'd need for the trip, got a little money from my mother, and borrowed her passport, which included me as a minor.

At eight on Monday morning, after breakfast, I said goodbye to Mum, and Peter and I set off from my flat on the corner of Wilson Street and Fourteenth Avenue. We walked down Borrow Street to Selborne Avenue and took up a position at Centenary Park.

Half an hour passed, and no one stopped despite our raised thumbs, so we picked up our suitcases and started off down Selborne Avenue. Not a promising beginning to our long trip, but only two hundred yards further along the avenue, a car pulled up next to us. The driver must have felt sorry seeing us lugging our suitcases down the road.

'You'll never get a long-distance lift here. I'll take you past the General Hospital turnoff, where it'll be easier to hitch a lift.'

A mile down the road, he dropped us near the outer edge of Kumalo, the last established suburb before the open road to Johannesburg. Soon, an elderly couple stopped and gave us a lift as far as Kensington, about seven miles out of Bulawayo.

Then, our progress halted as we waited for another lift for almost two hours. Now and then, to relieve the boredom and change the view, we'd walk one or two hundred yards. Now, my inexperience came to the fore. My suitcase was too heavy and too full, making my arms and hands ache, and we'd covered less than one percent of our journey. Changing my carrying hand and changing my grip gave me only brief respite.

Lunchtime approached, and we considered returning home for the night and trying again the following day. Just then, a car pulled up about fifty yards down the road, and we raced with our cases to reach it. The driver, a friendly Afrikaans man in his mid-thirties, returning

home after a short-term engineering job in Bulawayo, asked us where we were going. 'I can take you only as far as Springs, where I live.'

Springs was a satellite town east of Johannesburg and on the road to Durban. We couldn't believe our luck. Soon we passed the Blue Hills's long sweeping curves, and Essexvale a little after that. As we chatted away, Balla Balla, Gwanda, and West Nicholson all flicked by almost unnoticed before the run downhill into Beit Bridge.

Customs and immigration presented no difficulty on either side of the border. Once in South Africa, it was clear we'd left behind the endless Rhodesian bush and entered a region with large areas devoid of trees and bushes. Like all travellers entering South Africa from Beit Bridge, we made a brief stop at the Messina Hotel for something to eat and drink. Our generous new friend paid for our meals.

Soon, we were on our way again, passing through the picturesque little town of Louis Trichardt, and past the majestic kopjes of the Northern Transvaal before reaching Pietersburg and Potgietersrus. After Pretoria, we bypassed Johannesburg and headed to Springs. By now, it was getting late, so our friendly driver insisted we spend the night at his house, and we gratefully accepted.

His assurances that his wife wouldn't mind putting us up for the night proved correct, as she was most welcoming. Although past nine o'clock, she cooked a meal for the three of us. After the long, tiring drive, Peter and I soon fell asleep in the comfortable beds in the guest room.

The next morning, we enjoyed a breakfast of bacon and eggs, followed by tea and toast with butter and marmalade. We thanked our host and his wife for their hospitality before he drove us out onto the road to Durban. Stories about the risks of homicidal maniacs or dangerous drivers offering lifts to unsuspecting young hikers abounded, but I now thought hitchhiking wasn't too bad.

Springs to Durban turned out to be a slower journey than we expected, thanks to multiple short-distance lifts through uninspiring towns and dry countryside. Picturesque Pietermaritzburg was the exception with its distant views of the Drakensburg. Durban was near, but now our progress halted. The late afternoon passed, and the five o'clock rush hour came and went without a single car slowing to give us a lift.

As darkness descended, we thought our prospects of reaching Durban that night looked slim. Finally, much to our relief, a car with an elderly couple pulled up. 'You shouldn't hitchhike at night,' the lady said. 'It's dangerous.'

Half an hour later, on our left, the car's headlights picked up the sign for the Valley of a Thousand Hills, and five minutes after that, we reached our destination. Kloof turned out to be an elevated Durban suburb nine miles inland from the city.

It was seven o'clock when the elderly couple dropped us off at the edge of the silent, darkened suburb. Drizzle and a chilly breeze greeted us as we walked past elegant houses set on large, well-maintained, unfenced gardens. Peter's detailed directions to his parent's friends' house meant that even with the sparse street lighting we'd no difficulty locating the attractive corner property.

We walked up the path to the house and knocked. The door swung open, and the mature couple stared at us in amazement. Might we have the wrong house? But that wasn't the

reason for their surprised looks. ‘How on earth did you reach our front door? The dogs let no one onto our property.’

‘We didn’t see any dogs.’

They looked past us, so we turned to see two massive, fearsome-looking dogs standing behind us.

‘Quick, come in before the dogs do. Once they’re inside, we can’t get them out.’

Once inside, they told us, when their son-in-law visited, he used the sheepskin rug to chase them out, but that approach didn’t work for them.

‘If we try to get them out, they become aggressive—especially the white one.’

They assured us the dogs were otherwise well-trained. Apparently, they were as diligent about staying on their unfenced property as they were about keeping strangers off it.

Our hosts were most welcoming and pleased to see Peter. The best part was that we’d arrived in time for dinner. After dinner and much chatter, our gracious hosts showed us to our accommodation, a cosy, high-ceilinged, self-contained cottage set back against the tall trees at the house’s rear. The smell of the damp trees with the rustling branches in the night breeze gave it a fairytale atmosphere. So far, everything was going well.