

## CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS – PART TWO

A cool, grey morning in Kloof encouraged me to wear my emerald-green jumper. At breakfast, we met the family's younger daughter, who was about two years older than us. After we finished eating, our host offered us a lift into the city, where he worked. With our swimming costumes and towels stuffed into a small carrier bag, we hopped into his car.

Lesson number one was that Kloof's cool grey weather had no bearing on Durban's relentless summer sun. I spent the day lugging around my jumper, which wouldn't fit into the bloated small carrier bag that held our swimming things.

Durban beach, with its fresh sea air, warm water, and splashing waves, was glorious. Despite my pale skin colour, I didn't get sunburnt. The beach wasn't crowded, and we saw no one from our school, probably because most Rhodesians visited after Christmas. When you live in a landlocked country like Rhodesia, leaving the beach can be a wrench, but with the mid-afternoon sea breezes sandblasting our legs, we knew it was time to go.

The next few days followed a similar pattern, with the beach all morning until mid-afternoon, and then back to Kloof before the five o'clock rush hour—sans my emerald-green jumper.

On Friday evening, Peter and I caught a bus into the city to experience Durban's nightlife. An open-fronted Indian restaurant near the corner of Palmer and Gillespie Streets was our first stop. I'd enjoyed a curry there on my earlier Durban visit with my father and his family. 'A good curry must be hot,' he'd said, and this restaurant certainly delivered.

We'd only just sat down when Peter, looking past me, said, 'Have you lost something?' I recognised the familiar Rhodesian challenge to any stranger who held one's gaze a moment too long. It meant trouble. I turned to see three sturdy youths about our age standing on the pavement. From their appearance, they looked to be out to spoil someone's night. Often, that would be it, but the trio remained at the entrance, presenting an obvious challenge.

Peter was a tall, lean fellow with a low tolerance for anyone looking for trouble. He jumped up and marched to the door to confront them, and I followed to give him support.

Two of the youths looked like twins. The third, who appeared to be the leader, was the main aggressor. He'd not counted on someone like Peter, who was half a head taller than him. Peter's jaw and shoulders were set, with his unblinking eyes fixed on the leader, sending him an unmistakable message. 'Why were you staring at us?'

'We weren't.'

'Yeah! Apart from us, the restaurant's empty, so who were you staring at?'

'No one.'

'Are you looking for trouble?'

'No.'

'Well, clear off then.'

As his resolve began to crack, the leader struggled to find a retort. With his twin henchmen hanging back, his support looked thin. Soon, the trio walked away with Peter glaring after them.

Back inside the restaurant, they'd moved us to a different table, and this time I faced the entrance. The trio must have discussed their chances and decided the three of them against two skinny tourists was to their advantage and returned to the restaurant's entrance.

'Oh! I see they're still hanging around,' I said. Peter jumped up and marched out to meet them. Again, I followed in support.

'Why are you still here?' Peter demanded.

The leader mumbled something in reply. In his right hand lay a flick-knife. The blade was closed, but a press of the button would have exposed it. I kept my eyes on the knife, ready to react if necessary. Meanwhile, Peter warned them they'd be sorry if they stayed any longer. Again, the trio retreated. Back at our table, I said to Peter, 'The nerve of that guy, threatening you with a flick-knife.'

'A flick-knife? He had a flick-knife?'

'Yes, didn't you see it?'

Up he jumped, and again we marched out onto the pavement. 'Hey, you, come back here,' Peter shouted.

The apprehensive trio returned for another grilling. Of course, the leader denied he'd brought out his knife and claimed it had always remained in his pocket.

'So, how did my friend know you had it?' said Peter.

'It was just a lucky guess.'

'This is your last chance. If you don't get lost right now, I'll have your knife.'

Irrespective of how outmatched we may have looked, Peter's assertiveness made them think twice. The trio slunk off down Palmer Street, with the leader's credibility much diminished.

Earlier, we'd seen a poster advertising a dance at the Durban City Hall on West Street, so after dinner, we made our way there. We paid our five shillings, presented the back of our right hands for the purple rubber stamp, and entered the hall to find the people dancing to recorded music.

Everyone danced the same steps. They needed a Rhodesian to show them how it was done. One girl I asked to dance enquired if I did the two-step. When I said I didn't, she said, 'No thanks.' A distinct lack of imagination, I thought. Anyway, who wanted to dance to recorded music?

On the weekend, our host and his family entertained us. Sunday afternoon saw us at a café in Kloof with elevated views over the trees. We sat outside in the late afternoon sun, together with our hosts, their two daughters, and their son-in-law. The younger daughter livened the party. At one point, she asked if everyone was okay with her telling a dirty joke. No one objected, so she began.

In mid-sentence, she stopped. 'No, I can't tell it.'

'Why,' everyone enquired.

'I can't while Larry's here.'

Everyone laughed, especially my friend Peter. I suppose I must have had an innocent young face.

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Christmas was coming, and our hosts were preparing the house for a party. The older daughter and her husband needed the cottage so that the noise from the party wouldn't disturb their baby. So, for party night, they relocated us to a bedroom in the main house.

Most guests were around the age of our hosts' older daughter and her husband—about ten years older than us. After we'd eaten our fill of snacks and drunk a cold Castle Lager, we retired to our room to get an early night. A bathroom and toilet lay between our room and the next bedroom. Soon after we switched off our bedroom light, someone entered the toilet and switched on the bathroom light. Peter jumped out of his bed and switched off the bathroom light from the switch in our room. Again, the bathroom light came on, and Peter switched it off.

What fun! After the third time, it was my turn. The instant I switched off the bathroom light, the door flew open and an aggressive young woman abused me. It wasn't fair. I'd only done it once, and Peter, who was now in his bed, had done it three times. I was shocked. Fancy a female guest behaving like that in her host's house. An innocent young face didn't save me on that occasion.

The following day, we were back in our cosy garden cottage. Sadly, that night would be our last in Kloof, so the entire family gathered for our farewell dinner. They'd made us feel most welcome in their home and appeared to enjoy our visit as much as we did. It was a merry evening with much chatter and laughter, but it ended early because of our pending departure.

Up early the next morning, we ate a filling English breakfast and said goodbye and thank you to our hosts before setting off on the road home.

Several short-distance lifts saw us pass through Pietermaritzburg and Howick, and on to Mooirivier, where an old car pulled up, driven by a slight, grizzled-looking man. He was going to Pietersburg, yesss!

'I'm glad I found you two on the road. I've had a rough couple of days and I'm bugged. You can help me stay awake.'

His words were a little concerning, but we took it as a joke. Things seemed fine as far as Estcourt, but a hot, energy-sapping afternoon soon made his eyelids heavy, and the car drifted towards the verge. Peter, who sat next to him, often needed to tap his shoulder to alert him. It was too risky, but we couldn't just leave him on his own. Fortune provided us with an escape.

Soon after we entered the car, we heard a regular dull knocking, which became worse as we progressed. The big end needed replacing, and in the open countryside a little past Colenso, we discovered a garage. A mechanic in grease-covered overalls estimated that getting the spare part and completing the job would take about four hours.

It proved a blessing for our driver, who said he'd find a spot to get some sleep. Peter and I told him we needed to be back in Bulawayo the day before Christmas Eve, so we'd press on. In that isolated spot, we worried we might still stand opposite the garage when our driver resumed his journey. Fortunately, we soon got another lift that took us to the Ranch Motel, which lay between Potgietersrus and Pietersburg, and where we spent the night.

An early start the next morning saw us on the roadside just after sunrise. Soon, a sparkling white car pulled up to offer us a lift. The driver, a dapper middle-aged man wearing driving gloves, was a bigwig in the Automobile Association (AA). Best of all, he was going via Bulawayo to Victoria Falls for a visit.

Peter, tall, lean, and tanned, with short blonde hair and good looks, appeared a little older than his sixteen and a half years. Our new friend took to Peter, calling him 'My little brown berry,' even though Peter was a head taller than him. Peter was a man's man, and I wondered how he'd react. But he took it well, with amused smiles and laughing at the comments.

Before our driver dropped us off in Bulawayo, he arranged for us to meet him for a drink at the Hotel Vic on his way home to Johannesburg. I forgot all about it until soon after the New Year, Peter came around to remind me of our engagement. He wouldn't go to the Hotel Victoria on his own.

On the appointed evening, we went to the hotel to meet our new friend. After a beer, we wished him a safe journey and said goodbye. It marked the end of our hitchhiking adventure. It had been an enjoyable and rewarding experience. A couple of years later, after I left school, I became a regular hitchhiker on the road between Bulawayo and Salisbury.