

EVENTUALLY IT WAS our turn to get off the ship. With a trail of porters bringing our luggage, we made our way across the dock to the immigration desk just inside the large shed. The formalities were brief and a few minutes later, we emerged from the other side of the building to where a train stood waiting. The carriages were brown and cream, with Rhodesian Railways emblazoned along their tops.

We couldn't see the engine from where we boarded, and it was only later when the train reached some long sweeping curves that we could see the great puffing monster that was pulling us, smoke billowing from its funnel.

Our carriage had a corridor along one side and was divided into twin berth sleeping compartments. Each one had a hanging wardrobe and a small wash basin in the rear corner, with transverse bunks set above one another on the forward wall. Most of the fourth wall opposite the compartment door was a big window. You could lower it completely to pass in luggage so you didn't have to struggle along the narrow corridor with it. Since the compartments were meant for two people, and there were three of us and lots of baggage, we had two adjacent compartments allocated to us. Mum and I were to sleep in one, and Dad occupied the next one. He had to share with the luggage, which took up a whole bunk and half of the floor, but during the day he sat with us.

After all the bustle and efficiency on the dockside, it seemed to take ages before the train was loaded and finally started moving. Eventually there was a series of jolts and we crawled out of the docks and through the edge of the city.

On the corridor side, the land rose towards a huge flat-topped mountain, the fabled Table Mountain. Out of the compartment window, we could look out over the sea. I soon lost interest in the



*Mum and I on the train at Cape Town, waiting to depart.*

passing scenery, explored the compartment and made myself at home. We were going to spend the next three days in this train, so it paid to know where everything was and how it worked.

Little boys love exploring and fiddling, and I was no exception. I soon figured out how the fold-up bunks worked. Then I managed to spill water all over the floor by turning on the taps in the wash basin. It turned out that the drain wasn't connected to any pipework so it needed a bucket underneath to collect waste water. I also discovered I wasn't strong enough to raise or lower the large window on its heavy leather strap.

In a compartment at the other end of our carriage was a family with a little boy whom I had got to know on the ship. After frequent trips along the corridor, from one compartment to the other, we began to explore further afield and discovered the restaurant car.

It was late afternoon when the train left the docks, and it seemed like we had hardly left the city behind before it started getting dark. Before long the world was completely black outside. All we could see was a scatter of twinkling lights where there were

houses, and pale grey streamers of smoke from the engine, illuminated by light from the carriage windows.

We must have gone along to the restaurant car for supper, but I have no recollection of it. Before long it was time to lower the bunks and install myself in the top one. I slept soundly. The next thing I remember is Mum waking me for breakfast. She had raised the dark blind which covered the window the night before and flooded the compartment with golden sunlight. It was warm too.

Breakfast was a delight, with piles of fresh fruit and big bowls of cereal. Most of the fruit was new to me, and I wanted to try everything. Mum knew better, and let me try only one new thing at each meal. It was a clever way of making sure I was keen to get to the table, but also saved me from a case of the trots. After our somewhat restricted diet in post-war Britain, where some rationing was still in force, my stomach wasn't yet accustomed to the rich varieties on offer.

In the Britain we left behind, fruits such as pineapples, mangoes and *naartjies* weren't commonly available. In fact, for me pineapple had only ever come in small chunks, sealed in tins of sickly sweet juice. I liked *naartjies* which were exotic citrus fruits, similar to oranges but not quite as sweet, with less pith under the skin. They were also easier to peel. Their novelty and pretty name added to the attraction they held for me.

At lunch and in the evenings there was meat, more meat, and even more meat – more than we were used to. Yet it seemed to be the bulk of what people ate here. It was only after we arrived in Lusaka and were settled into our house that I discovered this was not the case; most local people lived on *sadza*, made from ground corn cobs, or *posho*, a kind of millet porridge. Meat was a luxury.

The countryside that first morning was wide and open, broad

rolling sweeps of grassland, dotted here and there with small clusters of huts and occasional clumps of trees, or small rock outcrops. As the day wore on, the rock outcrops got bigger until we passed some spectacularly large craggy edifices. There were small fields with crops growing in neat rows, interspersed with broad areas of grassland. Spindly flat-topped trees dotted the countryside. Long-horned cows grazed in closely grouped herds, watched over by little naked boys waving long sticks.

The train maintained a steady pace but it wasn't travelling very fast and it tended to go slower when we came to any sort of a gradient. Just before dark on that first full day, we came to a sprawling town of dusty streets and shiny tin roofs. Some buildings stood alone; others had gardens with spreading trees bearing scarlet flowers and pendulous black seedpods.

Occasionally we passed a tree that looked dull and almost dead, standing eerily skeletal and alone, bearing tufts of leaves at the tips of its grey branches. Clusters of white or pink flowers adorned some branches and long pendulous pods hung from others. These were trees I would come to know well and discover all sorts of good uses for, encountering them all over the continent during the years ahead. They were baobabs, called by the Africans the tree that God turned upside down, because their grey leathery trunk and branches, devoid of foliage for most of the year, looked more like roots than branches.

Our carriage was near the back of the train, and as we went around a long curve, I was excited to see its length stretched out before us. There were now two locomotives pulling us. Each had a tender, laden with wood, and we could see men tossing logs forward to fuel the engines. A slight breeze carried great billows of white smoke from the engines' funnels off to one side.

That afternoon Michael, the boy I had met on the boat, told me we would reach our destination the following day. He suggested we ought to make marks in our compartments, to claim them as our own. Even at that age, I had a little pocket knife so, while sitting on the floor supposedly playing with a Dinky Toy, I used it to scratch my mark on the underside of the metal washbasin in our compartment.

Almost fifty years later, I was to discover that same carriage in David Shepherd's railway museum at East Stoke, in Somerset. When I bent down to check the washbasin, I was delighted to find my mark still there.

Soon after breakfast on the third morning, the train slowed and came to a stop in a cloud. Looking out the window, we realised we were on a bridge and the cloud was in fact spray. It was accompanied by a deep rumbling sound. Dad opened the window to lean out and see where we were, but soon closed it again to prevent everything in the compartment from getting wet. A few moments later, we saw a man outside with a brush, attacking the train. Dad risked lowering the window again for a moment to ask what was going on.

"The crew are scrubbing the train," he announced as he hauled the window shut by its leather strap. He was bedraggled and soggy from where he had been hanging out to get a good view. "This is Victoria Falls. We've stopped on the bridge, and the crew are using the spray to wash off all the dust we collected crossing the veldt."

After about half an hour, the train moved off and we left the spray and the thunderous rumble of the falls behind. Coming out into the bright sunshine, we could see the length of the train on a curve. It looked like new. Later I asked our carriage steward why

they had washed the train that way on the bridge. “The water of *Mosi oa tunya* is free,” he told me, “and it washes better than hosepipes.”

*Mosi oa tunya*, I learned later, means ‘Smoke that thunders’. It seemed a particularly apt description and was my first introduction to the lyrical names Africans give both to natural phenomena and to people who have distinctive qualities.

After the Victoria Falls wash down, we stopped briefly at Livingstone, where a number of passengers disembarked, my new friend Michael included. The train rolled on, passing through increasingly frequent patches of verdant cultivated land. As the sun descended towards the western horizon, we pulled into Lusaka station. In the excitement of reaching our destination, I soon forgot Michael as many new encounters and experiences filled the days and weeks that followed.



*Mosi oa tunya as we could see it from our carriage window just before the bridge.*