

A Quick Decision
By Karla Brundage

This is an excerpt from the memoir, To Sing a Spirit to Heaven, by Karla Brundage, which chronicles the year 2001, when she lived in African Homelands of rural Zimbabwe with her seven-year-old daughter, Nia.

I could not get the memory of Nia's terror out of my mind. While my daughter seemed to be recovering from her mysterious illness, the night of the hospital visit and her delirium haunted me. I kept replaying the look of panic on her tiny brown face, gone both pale and flushed, as she fought for her life- her hand so hot in mine.

The next week, Nia safely at home and resting in bed, Tendayi and I made the long bus ride to KweKwe for our regular trip to the vegetable market and to check email. We wound our way through the colorful, wooden booths where mangos, tomatoes, plantain and butternut squash were sold, mostly by women. Other women and young children peddled soft ice cream, peanuts, gum and water from huge buckets balanced on their heads. We carried our reusable rice bags, since there were no plastic or paper at the market. We shopped until our bags were almost too heavy to carry. As soon as we could carry no more, we headed to a small, enclosed room at the bottom of one of the few two-story buildings in town, and ascended the stairs to the only internet café in the mid-country.

I paid with change, and logged on. The rate was 2Zim a minute, affordable for me, with the current exchange rate of 140Zim to \$1.00U.S. This rate was a hardship for Tendayi and other working class Zimbabweans, so we often shared our time. There was a message from Themba, her husband and my fellowship exchange partner in Hawaii. Usually, his messages were for his wife, but this time there was an additional message for me. After the regular pleasantries, in which he let us know his side of the exchange was going fine, he added this note, which held a serious tone.

"Karla, let me introduce you to my good friend Mr. Nxumalo. He teaches at a Level A school in KweKwe named Goldridge. He has two children who are educated. They are not country children. I think Nia should meet them. I have already written him a letter of introduction for you. I am sure now, you may understand why I suggested a boarding school for your daughter. The conditions which she must face daily are too hard."

I winced inside. I hated to be told that something was too hard for me. Each day was a challenge, and I was always ready to fight. Nia and I had survived the conditions of the school, two bouts of mystery illness that were thought to be malaria, and she had attended the village school for half the year. Could I admit that this trip was too much for me? In my memory, I heard Nia screaming in the hospital as the nurses had pinned her down to inject her with the anti-malarial serum using a needle that I could not be certain was sterile. She had a fever of 104. She was pacing and could not stop shaking. She had

lost all her baby weight. Maybe I was slow to realize this was not about me, but about her.

“Furthermore, I have instructed Tendayi to introduce you to the Nxumalo’s. If possible, you will meet them as soon as you receive this communication.”

Tendayi read the email and agreed. We must take Nia to meet the Nxumalo’s today.

A week later, carrying a weeks worth of groceries, and with Nia in tow, we traveled by taxi to a part of KweKwe I had never before seen. Although we had been shopping there for nearly eight months, I had never seen the *residential* area. The houses in this area were mostly inhabited by whites and upper class Africans, and were of a different standard than the houses I had seen pervious to this, which belonged mainly to poor farmers and teachers. There was electricity. Each house had a gate and a garden. There was a sort of western feel to the layout of houses. I began to immediately feel at home. Although the roads were unpaved, many people had cars. Eventually, we arrived at a modest house with a fence. A large dog growled at the gate, and we were soon greeted by a young maid, named Sweetie, who let us in. At the door was a welcome mat and a sign that read, “God Bless our Home.”

As is traditional, Mr. Nxumalo came out clapping and laughing. He was a dark man, with black-rimmed, owl-like glasses. He had a large smile and very white teeth. He was impeccably dressed in suit and tie, even on a Saturday. “Welcome,” he said. “You must be Karla, and this must be Nia. Come inside! We were just about to have our tea.”

We entered his sitting room and were seated on a western style couch as we waited to be served tea. We washed our hands in the traditional way, Sweetie, kneeling before each person with a bowl of warm water poured-over and a rag to dry. After the ceremonial greetings in Shona and Ndebele, Mr. Nxumalo introduced Nia to his children, Esmeralda who was 8 – exactly Nia’s age and Donald who was 11. The children quickly hit it off. To my amazement, and Nia’s delight, they had an original version Super Mario hooked up to old, but working, color television. In Zhombe, we only had access to one television station, ZBC TV. As the kids played, the adults talked. Although since Super Mario was such a novel concept, we adults also engaged in the game, cheering and giving advice. After tea, it was agreed that Nia would spend the night there. It was a quick decision, but the sun was going down and with the dangerous night driving conditions, as well as the unpredictable bus drivers, I had to succumb to the pressures surrounding me.

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A few days later, Tendayi and I returned to KweKwe to meet Mr. Nxumalo at his school, Goldridge, and to pick up Nia. I was astonished by the cemented sidewalks and manicured grass. The buildings were freshly painted and the classrooms each had a sign with the name of the teacher as well as the grade level outside the door. In the distance beckoned a large Cricket field complete with thoughtfully placed shade and flame trees. The students wore crisply ironed school uniforms with blue skirts and jackets. The young

women even wore smart, striped ties. Including the few times I had traveled with the debate team with Rio Tinto Zhombe students, I had not seen such a beautiful school.

“What do you think of our school?” asked Mr. Nxumalo, proudly.

“It is beautiful. I just did not know...”

“Naturally you didn’t. We have excellent schools in Zimbabwe also. Goldridge is one of our finest Level A schools. I am sure Nia will get a place here.”

“A place.”

“Why yes. Themba assured me it would be in Nia’s best interest to enroll immediately.”

“But how would I get her here?” I stammered. The weekly trip to KweKwe was arduous and could take anywhere from 1-3 hours by bus. We had been looking for a car, but there were gas shortages and almost no women drove, certainly not black women.

“Of course, she would stay with us.”

“With you?” I was shocked. My whole life revolved around my daughter. What could he be implying? That I would just allow my 8-year-old daughter to move in with a family I had known 15 minutes.

“She wants to stay.”

“She ... what ...” I could hear myself trailing off.

“I believe she wants to stay with us. You should leave her here for a week or two. Next time you come back, you will know that this is the right school for her. Goldridge has a swimming pool, Cricket teams, and many classrooms with many teachers, and computers, and art, and the teachers *care* about the students.” He emphasized the word *care*, which was coded language for the fact that there would be no corporal punishment in the A Level School. One of the most traumatizing aspects of Nia’s transition to the village school was not the lack of electricity or supplies, but the act of and words around “beating” children for misbehavior. Mr. Nxumalo continued, “We have only thirty students per classroom. *And* we speak English,” he made this last sentence as the big reveal and smiled with pride before continuing. “This will be much more to her liking, much more comfortable for her if you know what I mean. Tell me, what has school been like for Nia in the village?” He asked rhetorically, but I answered anyway.

“It has been very, very difficult,” I confessed. “There is no electricity. There are almost 50 children in every room. Most are so poor they cannot afford shoes. The teacher is hardly there because she is at her second job selling candy outside the school she works in. I think what has been the hardest is that the children at the school follow her

everywhere mocking her accent, and touching her hair. I can't imagine what it is like, really." Nia had a mixture of her parents' hair; curly ringlets circled her face. Moreover, in Zimbabwe, young girls were made to shave their heads before entering school; an exception had been made for Nia. I only got a feel for what she was experiencing when I went to campus on National Youth Day, and a group of children were following us, laughing at everything we did or said. "Some children hate us, as Americans, but most of them just want to look at us. I guess I did not know what she was encountering that everyday at school. To be honest, when I asked her, I did not listen," I gushed.

"Yes, the children in the countryside are not worldly. Many have never seen a murungu (American) before. You are an oddity."

"But how could I have made her stay at that school for so long? Why didn't I see before?"

"Maybe you felt like you had no other choice, but now you do."

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. "I am sure Nia will not stay with you. She has been very clear that she would not leave my side," I almost lashed out.

"Let's ask her," said Mr. Nxomalo calmly.

I looked at Tendayi. I longed to have a private conversation with her. One of the major goals of coming to Zimbabwe was for Nia to experience living in a village. I wanted her to learn the language, to experience life just as they did. I felt a sudden and specific loneliness that I always felt when I had to make a big decision about Nia. This was the void her father had left. As always, there was no one to turn to--no one to consult. And yet, there was Tendayi. I looked at her.

"Edgar," she said calling Mr. Nxumalo by his first name, "perhaps this is a topic for the women to discuss together."

"Why yes, of course," he said, "I would like to show Nia the Cricket field. Please go to the main office and pick up an application. You can also find out what the school fees are and if there are openings. However, I know with the current political situation, and your American dollars, there are bound to be openings." He smiled and called the children from the play structure to walk them toward the Cricket field. It was the first play structure we had seen since we arrived.

"Tendayi, what do you think?" I asked, as soon as he was out of earshot.

Tendayi took my hand. "Karla, I think the village school is too hard for Nia. At this school every child will speak English- most of them as a first language. In KweKwe you have modern conveniences of electricity, and there are less mosquitos. There are white children at this school, and Zimbabweans from middle class families; there are coloreds too, also, Indians. I think this is what you are accustomed to right?"

“I did not want her to go to an American school.”

“This is not an American School. This is a Zimbabwean School. When we used to live under Apartheid, there were two levels of school Class A – this was for the whites, Class B was for colored and Indians, and Class C for Blacks. Rio Tinto is called a class A school, but it is not. This is a class A school, but it is integrated now. The whites who send their children here, have accepted change. They are kind white people here, and Mr. Nxumalo teaches here himself. He will look after her.”

“If Nia goes to Goldridge, I will have to move.”

“This may be the case, but I believe it is best for her.”

I knew what she was saying was true. I suddenly felt an overwhelming sadness, as I realized that it had always been true and that I had held on stubbornly to my belief that Nia would one day adjust to life in the village. My stubbornness had almost killed her. Again, I remembered how sick and frail she had become. How nightly I looked at her sleeping and wondered if she would be okay by the end of the year or even alive. I wondered if I had irreparably wounded her psyche.

“OK”

We walked hand and hand across the field to the children.

Nia came running up to me, “Can I stay here, mom?”

“Huh”

“What do you mean, now?”

“Yes.”

“You mean you don’t want to go back to KweKwe? With me?”

“No. I want to live here.”

“If you stay, I wont be back for a whole week.”

“I know... I don’t want to go back to Zhombe. I can stay here with the Nxumalo’s and go to school here. You can live in Zhombe and I will see you on weekends.”

“What?” I gasped.

I was shocked. While I had intellectually discussed it only moments before, to hear her resolution was shattered something inside of me.

I knew I could never leave her, but at the same time, I could not ignore her clarity. Here I had come to go shopping and now I was losing my child.