

Chapter 3 – Salisbury

Norah's heart thumped in her chest, an unfamiliar sensation, a little like the way it thudded when the hyenas followed her on the dirt path. When she got married, her heart thumped with anxiety, and when her baby came, it beat with a serene contentment., but this was different. It was as if her heart raced ahead of her, and she was trying to catch up with it.

Sheer excitement, exhilaration with only a hint of apprehension, were new emotions for Norah. She'd seen several motor vehicles visit the village over the years, but this was the first time she'd ridden in one. Although the driver drove slowly over the rough dirt road, the tall grass seemed to fly past the Land Rover's window. Norah was nervous about the speed they travelled, but assumed the driver must know what he was doing.

Every kilometre provided Norah with a thrill. A scared buck scampered away from the vehicle as they passed. The rocks, the trees, the swaying grass, all took on a disproportionate importance. Even the clouds looked bigger to her, and she could smell rain in the fresh country air. The new life she'd always dreamt of had finally begun. The moment sharpened all her senses, giving her a new appreciation of her surroundings. Jarring bumps and rattles shook the vehicle's occupants as it made its way.

All too soon, the rough dirt road ended as it reached the smooth, grey, tarred Umtali to Salisbury main road. The slow progress along the rutted dirt road took over forty minutes, but to Norah, it seemed a quarter of that. She stared in bewilderment at the wide road with frequent cars speeding past in both directions. Dorothy, her mother, often mentioned it, but it was beyond anything she'd imagined.

The driver turned left onto the road and sped up the vehicle, travelling faster and faster. Norah saw everything with fresh eyes. An old African man waved hesitantly as he watched them race past. Piccanins played on the roadside. A lorry raced past in the opposite direction. She didn't want to miss anything.

Then Norah turned her attention to the Land Rover's interior, and the two people sitting in front. She caught the African driver watching her in the rear-view mirror and averted her eyes, pretending she'd not noticed. But the next time she looked, he again glanced in her direction. She slid across the seat to sit behind the driver, where he couldn't see her.

In the passenger seat, the mature European nurse, with her blonde hair pulled back in a neat bun, looked to Norah to be a kind and gentle person. The few white men who'd visited the village always spoke in loud voices, giving instructions to their African staff, and chiding them to work faster.

The nurse half turned in her seat, looking at Norah sitting behind the driver. 'Why are you going to Salisbury, Norah?'

'I want a job so I can get money for my son to attend a city school. If he's educated, he'll have a better future.'

'How many children do you have, Norah?'

'Just the one, Madam.'

'Most young women in your village have two or three children.'

'My husband left when he discovered I was pregnant and hasn't come back.'

‘I wish more of the village women would heed my talks on birth control and have fewer children. Then they might also provide them a better future.’

The driver laughed. ‘The women don’t follow your advice because they think you are part of a government plan to keep down the African population. Also, more children will give them more security in their old age.’

They passed through small European settlements. Rusape was the first town of any size that Norah had seen. Then came Marandellas, which Norah thought was Salisbury, much to the nurse’s amusement. They drove through the town, and in minutes, were back on the open road. Bit by bit, the bush thinned, and the trees gave way to houses, which seemed to get closer together as they drove. Soon, no sign remained of the bush that accompanied them for the past three-and-a-half-hours.

‘Are you staying with friends or relatives, Norah?’

‘No, Madam.’

‘Well, where are you staying? Where do you want us to drop you?’

‘In a good suburb, please, Madam.’

‘What good suburb? Don’t you know where you’re going?’

‘No, Madam, but I can find a good job in a good suburb.’

‘Goodness! We can’t just drop you in a good suburb. Where will you spend the night?’

‘I don’t know, Madam.’

‘How much money do you have?’

‘Five pounds, Madam.’

‘Five pounds! Is that enough, Andrew, for safe accommodation for Norah?’

The driver shrugged.

‘It’s getting dark. Norah, you can come home with me. My girl, Daisy, has a spare room in her kia. I’m sure she won’t mind looking after you for tonight.’

‘Thank you, Madam.’

Tall buildings emerged on the skyline, prompting Norah to slide back across the seat for a better view. Her body trembled with excitement as they approached the city. The buildings were much bigger than she’d imagined. All her mother’s tales of the big city had not prepared her for such a spectacle. Much to Norah’s disappointment, on the CBD’s edge, the driver turned right.

Norah noticed the sign saying 7th Street and sat staring at the buildings as they receded into the distance. The roads glistened from an earlier shower, reflecting the green, orange, and red of the traffic lights. The street lights sparkled, as if welcoming her to her new home. For Norah, accustomed to the night’s blanketing darkness in the bush, it was an unimaginable sight.

‘There on your left is where the prime minister lives, Norah. It’s a good area, but finding work here might prove difficult. They would only employ people with a lot of domestic experience.’

‘My mother always talked about her work, Madam, so I know what to do. At school, I was good at English and arithmetic. I can shop and know the right change when I buy things.’

‘That sounds fine, Norah, but I’m not sure it will be enough. It’s good you are ambitious, but you may have to accept a lesser job to gain some experience.’

‘No, Madam, my mother said I must only accept a job with a rich family in the best area.’

Norah stared at the buildings and green fields on her left-hand side. They passed houses before coming to large open areas on both sides of the road. Then there were more houses; lots of them. Soon, they left the main road and drove into the heart of a suburb. The driver slowed the Land Rover and turned into a driveway of a house.

‘Well, here we are, Norah. Same time tomorrow morning please, Andrew.’

‘Yes, Madam. See you in the morning.’

Norah grabbed her small suitcase and held it to her chest as she surveyed the house. As the driver reversed the vehicle, an African woman appeared at the front door.

‘You’re late, Madam Sandra. I was worried about you.’

‘You worry too much, Daisy. This is Norah. She will be our guest for a few days until she makes other arrangements. Please put her in the kia spare room.’

Daisy responded with a polite ‘Yes, Madam,’ but Norah saw she wasn’t too pleased with the request. She followed the housemaid to the kia in the back garden. Daisy opened a door and gestured for her to enter. The maid flicked on the light switch, and a dim twenty-five-watt light bulb flickered into action. Daisy set about gathering several items and took them to her room next door. She’d been using the room to store a few of her possessions, and that probably explained why Norah’s arrival irritated her.

‘I will ask the madam for blankets for your bed.’

In a corner stood a narrow, iron-framed bed with a thin coir mattress. After Daisy finished removing her possessions, nothing much remained, but for Norah, the room looked luxurious. Movement at the doorway caught the women’s attention. Sandra stood there, holding two blankets for the bed.

‘Daisy, please make sure Norah gets something to eat. We left her village at short notice, and I’m sure she’s hungry.’

‘Yes, Madam, we’ll have sadza and curried beef. There is enough for both of us.’

Until then, food was far from Norah’s thoughts, but yes, she was hungry, and her digestive juices flowed with the anticipation.

‘Norah, you must be ready to leave by half-past-seven tomorrow morning, when Andrew will pick me up to go into my office in the city. We’ll drop you in The Avenues. There are many houses there. If you’re lucky, you might find work. Leave your suitcase here. You can’t carry it around all day.’

‘Yes, Madam.’

‘Madam is too kind to let you stay here.’

‘Yes, she is. You are lucky to work here. Is she rich?’ Norah noticed Daisy’s coolness towards her was evaporating once she realised she was not a threat to her own employment.

‘She’s rich compared to me, but not rich compared to some people in Borrowdale or The Avenues.’

‘The Avenues? Ah! Yes, the madam remembers I want a job with a rich family.’

‘In The Avenues there are houses and flats. The richer people live in the houses. Not all rich people are kind, like my madam. I worked in a big house with a big garden. The family had many cars and were richer than my madam, but they treated me like a slave. They were always shouting, “Daisy, come do this, and Daisy, go do that!” I worked from seven in the morning to eight at night. Even later, sometimes.’

‘I won’t work in such a job.’

‘When you are hungry, you’ll work in any job.’

‘My mother worked for a rich family and told me I must only work for a rich family to earn more money.’

‘Enough money is more important than more money. My madam says she doesn’t make too much money, but she gives me a place to live free, and gives me food and clothes, and time off.’

Norah lay in bed, thinking about the village and wondering how little John was getting on without her. She’d only seen him that afternoon, but already it seemed so long ago. She hoped he’d understand one day that she did what she did for his sake. Did he miss her as much as she missed him? Perhaps even more.

How fortunate she’d been to get a lift to Salisbury with nurse Sandra. In her excitement, leaving for the city, she hadn’t considered where she’d stay that night, or the nights that followed. Sandra said she should leave her suitcase in her room while she looked for a job. That meant she could stay for at least a few nights. It was one less thing to worry about, but she’d have to be careful not to overstay her welcome. While the maid appeared more friendly, things might change if she stayed too long.

Daisy seemed happy in her employment, but she said nurse Sandra couldn’t pay her too much. In a similar job, how could she afford to send young John to the best school? No, she would need to find a job in a wealthy household to support her son’s education for a prosperous future.

Norah’s mother warned her about the competition for jobs in the city. She held the advantage of her mother’s stories about her experiences working for a wealthy family in the best suburb. It qualified her for a similar position. What other maid could vie with her knowledge of such a job? The only problem was she couldn’t remember the name of the best suburb. Neither Borrowdale nor The Avenues sounded familiar to her.

A narrow window next to the ceiling gave Norah a view of the bright, twinkling stars. The same stars shone over her village, above the roofs of the huts where little John and her best friend, Tadiwa, slept. A sudden feeling of homesickness swept through her. How would she manage without them in the big city? The thought challenged her confidence in her ambitious plans. Perhaps she was not like her mother after all. Her mother was absent for years, and she’d grown up without her mother’s love. It was not a price she was prepared to pay, in John’s case.

Norah’s eyelids grew heavy, and soon she fell asleep, wondering if little John was missing her.