

Chapter 5 – The Interview

Monday, the start of a new week. The weekend invigorated Norah, and she was determined to find a job before the next weekend, perhaps even today. There was no sign of Daisy, and Norah presumed she was still sick. Sandra and Andrew, the driver, were their normal cheerful selves as the trio set off for the city.

‘If you don’t find a job in The Avenues within the next few days, Norah, you could try a different suburb, perhaps Borrowdale.’

Sandra’s words were like a spur to Norah. Giving up on finding something in The Avenues sounded like admitting defeat. She set out with renewed vigour to find that elusive job her mother spoke of. On Monday, she covered twice the number of houses she’d visited on the most productive day of the previous week, and on Tuesday, she did the same.

A worry crept into Norah’s mind. Knocking on twice the number of doors led to twice the number of rejections. At several houses, the white madams were home, but it made no difference to the result. Was there something wrong with her approach? Could they tell she was not the experienced housemaid she tried to project? Often, even before she spoke, they told her there was no work.

Daisy appeared to have recovered from her cold, but seemed to be avoiding her. Norah realised her time at Sandra’s house was fast running out. At first, Daisy tolerated her presence, but now there was no mistaking her hostility.

When Sandra finished with each day’s newspaper, she gave it to Daisy, who’d often used it to light a fire under the kia’s grill. If she cooked her meal in the house kitchen, Daisy would store the unused newspaper in the small cupboard next to the grill, and this soon became Norah’s library.

Each evening, Norah would check the cupboard for the newspaper. It frustrated her when she found the current day’s paper missing, because she’d encouraged Daisy to always use the oldest papers from the bottom of the pile. Since Sandra’s cocktail party, the current newspaper was always missing, and Norah suspected it was deliberate.

On Wednesday evening, the morning paper was in the cupboard, and Norah grabbed it and returned to her room to read. She read every article and scanned the advertisement columns. Her eyes settled on a tiny advertisement under the heading, ‘Experienced Housekeeper Wanted.’ Norah sat on her bed with her heart thumping in her chest. It was a live-in position in The Avenues. There was a phone number to call.

Norah hurried to the house to see Sandra. ‘Madam, have you seen this advertisement? Can I please use your phone?’

Sandra read the ad. ‘Norah, you’ll never get this job. It’s for a housekeeper. A housekeeper is senior to a housemaid. They want an experienced housekeeper, and you’re not even an experienced housemaid.’

‘Please, Madam, I must try.’

‘OK, Norah, if you must. But I think you’re wasting your time. The phone is by the front door.’

‘Thank you, Madam.’

Norah's hands shook as she picked up the phone. She carefully dialled the number and listened to the ring on the other side. After only three rings, someone answered. It surprised Norah to hear an African voice on the line.

Sandra was curious and stood around the corner in the lounge. She could only hear Norah's side of the conversation. 'Yes, yes was all Norah kept saying.'

Norah replaced the receiver and turned to Sandra, who stood there with raised, questioning eyebrows. 'I must go for an interview on Friday, Madam.'

Sandra studied Norah's tackies, and her old, blue buttoned down the front dress. 'You can't go to an interview for a housekeeper's job looking like that, Norah. I'll see what I can find for you to wear. I think you are roughly my size.'

In her dressing room, Sandra rummaged through drawers, opening and closing them, looking for something suitable. She tossed a few items onto the room's single bed and selected a pair of low-heeled black shoes. 'Here, try these on.'

The shoes fitted Norah, and after a lot more searching, Sandra selected a black pencil skirt and a white blouse. 'I don't wear these clothes anymore, so you can keep them.'

'But, Madam, what about Daisy? She will be jealous if you give me clothes.'

'I've given her lots of clothes in the past, but she's put on weight, and they won't fit her now. Try them on to see how they fit you.'

Norah slipped out of her dress and put on the blouse and skirt, admiring herself in the full-length mirror behind the cupboard door. She felt like Cinderella in the book she'd read at the mission school. 'Thank you, Madam. They must give me the job now.'

'Don't get your hopes up too much, Norah, though you look the part.'

Norah was certain her new clothes would get her the job, so she didn't bother going into town with Sandra on Thursday morning. When she saw Daisy, she blurted out the news about her interview on Friday. On this occasion, Daisy didn't brush past her with a sullen face.

'Oh! If you are going for an interview, you must get your hair done.'

'I don't have enough time, or money, for someone to do my hair.'

'Gladys, the maid next door, makes extra money by doing the hair for all the maids in this street. I will ask her if she can help you. You can pay her later if you don't have the money now.'

'It's so kind of you to help me, Daisy.'

'Eish! It's not a problem.'

In the early afternoon, Daisy took Norah to meet the maid next door. Gladys studied Norah's hair and concluded a head of short, tight curls was the simplest and most fashionable hairstyle, given the limited time to do a good job. Gladys was fastidious about her cutting of Norah's hair and grunted with satisfaction when she finished. Daisy's effusive praise of Gladys's work further boosted Norah's confidence.

Back in her room, Norah admired herself in the mirror. The short hairstyle with her arched eyebrows accentuated her even features. She needed a reliable second opinion and hung about the front gate to welcome Sandra home.

'You're looking very pretty today, Norah.'

'Thank you, Madam.'

'But there's something missing.'

Norah's face fell. 'Missing, Madam?'

‘Yes. Come and see me after dinner.’

Why did the madam want to see her after dinner? The question intrigued her. What did she mean by saying something was missing? Norah gulped down her own dinner and waited impatiently for signs of Sandra finishing hers.

When Daisy returned to her room after washing the dishes, Norah headed to the house to see Sandra. She walked through the kitchen’s open back door and knocked on the dining room’s wooden door frame.

Sandra came through from the lounge. ‘Ah, there you are, Norah. Here, try these on.’ She handed Norah a pair of white plastic stud clip-on earrings. ‘And here’s a black handbag you can carry on your shoulder.’

Norah clipped on the earrings and examined herself in the mirror hanging in the hallway. She turned to Sandra for affirmation.

‘Yes, that’s it, Norah. Now you will look like a housekeeper.’

‘Thank you, Madam.’

Friday morning. Norah felt twinges in her stomach. What if the interview didn’t go well? What if she didn’t get the job? She showered and ate her breakfast before getting dressed. As she put on her new clothes and clipped on the earrings, her confidence returned. Why shouldn’t she get the job? What reason would they have for not giving it to her? Neither Daisy nor Gladys, nor any of the maids she’d seen in the street, looked as smart as she did today. That, together with the knowledge she’d gleaned from her mother’s stories, would be irresistible to any employer.

In the Land Rover, driving to the city, Sandra asked Norah when her interview was.

‘Half-past two, Madam.’

‘You can’t walk around all morning in the sun, getting all hot and sweaty. Here’s ten shillings. Buy a cool drink and find a shady spot to sit until it’s time for your interview. Do you have the address?’

‘Yes, Madam, I know the street.’

‘All right! Good luck! We’ll see you at half-past five.’

‘Thank you, Madam.’

On her earlier visits to The Avenues, Norah noticed a garage selling petrol. By the entrance stood a large cooler box filled with iced water and cool drinks. She’d walk there to buy a Fanta orange before finding a shady spot to wait. She carried her usual sandwiches wrapped in grease-proof paper in her handbag.

The shady spot Norah found lay at a discreet distance from the house where she’d go for the interview. It proved to be a long morning, interspersed with curious but friendly passersby. At a quarter-past two, Norah dumped her empty Fanta bottle in a bin near the gate of a house, and headed for her interview.

Norah arrived at her destination and paused for a moment. The house was a large, old, red brick, colonial style bungalow. A shady veranda ran along the front and down one side of the house. A compacted sandy driveway on the house’s other side led to the backyard. Norah walked up the garden path and ascended the half-dozen red-polished, wide steps leading to the front veranda. She used the heavy brass knocker on the front door.

She was about to knock again when the front door swung open. A well-dressed African man stood there. He wore black trousers and a black waistcoat, with a burgundy-coloured shirt and black bow tie. On his hands, he wore white cotton gloves.

‘I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, but I was polishing the silver and didn’t hear your knock. Fortunately, Philemon, the chef, heard you and told me you were here. My name is Stanford. You must be Norah Ziyambi. Please come in.’

Norah passed through the front door into a large wood-panelled entrance hall. On one wall hung a buffalo head with a shiny black nose and smooth curved horns. The head of a lioness, baring its teeth, hung on another wall. The third wall displayed the head of an enormous male eland.

A large wooden table with carver chairs at each end were the only items of furniture in the entrance hall. Stanford invited Norah to sit in one, and he took the other.

‘Now, about this position, Norah. We need an experienced housekeeper to assist with all the roles in this house. Can you cook?’

‘Yes, and I’ve prepared snacks and served drinks at cocktail parties.’

‘Good! That sounds promising. I presume you can manage the household budget, looking after the money and shopping when required? Usually, our chef goes to the shops and selects all the fruit and vegetables and other groceries, but if he’s unavailable, you’d have to do it.’

‘Yes, I can do that.’

‘Do you drive?’

Norah’s heart sank. She couldn’t pretend she did. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘Well, that’s not a big problem. We can always arrange for driving lessons. Come, I’ll show you through the public areas of the house.’

Stanford led her past the buffalo head through heavy arched wooden doors into the front room. A wooden desk with a leather covered office chair stood in one corner next to a large bookcase that almost reached the ceiling. Four large leather armchairs surrounded a polished wooden coffee table, and a further two armchairs sat in another corner of the room.

Against one wall stood a glass-fronted cabinet, holding a variety of glasses and jugs. Norah stopped in front of it. There stood the jugs with the metal lids her mother often described. ‘Oh! Those are nice beer steins.’

‘Yes, they’re from Germany.’

‘And the wine and champagne glasses?’

‘The wine glasses are from Austria. I’m not sure about the champagne glasses.’

Next, Stanford led Norah through a door into the dining room. The large dining table seated eight with a carver chair at each end. Stanford slid open the top drawer of the sideboard.

‘You would need to set the table for dinner parties. Can you arrange a formal place setting?’

‘Oh yes! I’ve done silver service. What nice cutlery! I like those fish knives.’

Stanford slid the drawer closed. ‘The kitchen is through here. I’ll introduce you to Philemon, our chef.’

The elderly man greeted Norah with a broad smile. ‘Welcome Mrs.’ The greeting made her realise just how senior the housekeeper’s position would be in the household.

Norah looked around the kitchen, nodding in appreciation.

Stanford led Norah back through the dining room to the entrance hall.

‘You understand this is a live-in position?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll need a reference from your previous employer. Can you please give me their name and phone number?’

Norah gave Sandra’s name and number. What else could she do?

‘Good! And please give me your phone number, so I can call you after I’ve completed all the interviews. Four other applicants have applied for the position. I’ve seen two this morning, and two more are coming this afternoon. I’ll phone you with my decision on Monday.’

Norah explained she was living at her previous employer’s home, so the phone number was the same. She left the interview and walked slowly to the meeting point to wait for Sandra. It would be at least two hours before Sandra and Andrew would arrive. She’d plenty of time to think about how her interview went. Did her knowledge of the steins and glassware impress him? What about her delight at seeing the fish knives? Sandra said few people possessed them these days.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t make much comment about the items in the kitchen. She’d no experience of using an oven or hotplates, let alone a toaster or electric kettle. All she’d done in Sandra’s kitchen was to make sure nothing burnt, and then help Sandra lay out the snacks on the trays.

How would she manage if the chef was absent? She said she could cook, but all she’d ever cooked was sadza and curried diced meat, and sometimes strips of meat over an open fire. Getting the correct change at the shops wouldn’t be a problem, but could she select the best meat and vegetables, and the juiciest fruit? And what would Sandra say when he phoned her for a reference?

Norah’s confidence crumbled. Four others applied for the job. Perhaps one of them would be successful? Perhaps they could comment on the items in the kitchen?

Norah was in for an anxious weekend, waiting for Stanford’s phone call.