

Chapter 19 – Time Flies

John found it hard to believe how fast his time in the lower forms passed. Soon, he'd be going into form four and studying for the Cambridge O Level examinations. So far, his three years at school in England provided him with few challenges. He topped the class in all his exams, leaving him plenty of time for sports and other enjoyable pastimes. His friends, Parker, Ponsonby, and Fellowes, envied the ease with which he sailed through school life.

Often, John helped one of them with a class project. Parker, above all, struggled to keep up with the increasing complexity of the lessons.

'I envy you, Ziyambi. You study little, yet you come first in class. I wish I had your brains.'

'We're all gifted in different areas, Parker. Look at you! You're the school squash champion.'

'Yes, but that's only because you don't play squash.'

'That's not true. But I notice you also study little, and that could be your problem. The others study a lot more than you. Follow their example, and you'll do a lot better in class.'

'I find study boring.'

'What do you plan to do when you leave school?'

'I'll follow my father into the army.'

'I could never join the army. Too many people bossing you around. It's too controlled for my liking.'

'Well, what are you planning to do?'

'I don't know. Maybe I'll become a journalist or go into politics.'

'Politics, yuck! Talk to Fellowes about that. His dad deals with politicians the whole time. He says they're a bunch of opinionated self-servers.'

'Not all of them, surely?'

The chat with Parker gave John something to consider. What would he do after leaving school? Judge Barclay and the school both suggested he go to university. That would help to defer his decision, but what would he do after university? Well, he'd marry Aneni, but that was as far as his plans went. He'd not thought about how he'd make a living.

Parker's dad suggested the army needed men like him, natural leaders who others would follow. But John was unwilling to spend years submitting to authority while climbing the ranks. Parker's dad said he should go to Sandhurst and afterwards consider joining the British Army. He found aspects of the suggestion intriguing because, under the current regime, his prospects in Rhodesia would be limited.

John put all these thoughts behind him. Three years of school remained before he needed to choose his future path. But now, it was the end of the school year, and the next six weeks dominated his thoughts.

There'd be the usual debrief with Judge Barclay before Mortimer took him to the village. And his mother would also visit for two weeks during his stay there. The boss and Stanford were very generous in granting his mother extra leave to allow her more time with him.

John made the Harare to London return trip nine times over the past three years, so he was now a seasoned traveller. The reliable Arthur was always there with his taxi to meet him or

drop him off at Heathrow Airport. It was all smooth sailing, and the previous three years had flown.

Life was sweet for John. He was aware of the troubles in his homeland, but everything seemed under control. His mother wrote that the incursions by the insurgents did not affect their lives in the household, despite the April coup in Portugal. Even Aneni said in her letters all was relatively peaceful in the Buhera district, and that most incursions occurred in the country's North-East.

John left Heathrow carefree, excited about the trip home and to unwind in the village with Aneni. But first, he needed to update his mother, Stanford, and Philemon, with all the news about his last term in form three. Already, he was in the school's first cricket team, and expected to make the rugby first fifteen on his return as a fourth former. After dinner on the plane, he reclined his seat and drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

As usual, his mother and Mortimer met him at the airport in Harare. They were delighted to see him, but he noticed they seemed a little subdued. Perhaps they were getting used to his arrivals, and the novelty was wearing off.

At the house, he dumped his things in the room he shared with his mother and hurried to the kitchen to greet Stanford and Philemon. Norah was quick to follow him into the kitchen. Upon seeing John, the old chef's face crinkled into a mosaic of smiles. John was everyone's favourite in this household. After they'd exchanged greetings, John looked about him. 'Where's Stanford?'

Philemon's face fell, suddenly looking older than John remembered. The old man hesitated, glancing at Norah.

Norah cleared her throat, her voice thickening. 'Stanford died, John.'

'What! How? When?'

'One evening last week, he visited his regular bar lounge in the location, and two strangers there picked on him for no apparent reason. The bar's security kicked them out, and they thought that was it. But those strangers must have waited outside for Stanford and followed him when he left an hour later. Someone found Stanford's body a block from the bar lounge and called the police. They'd beaten him to death.'

'Have the police caught them?'

'Not yet. No one knows who those men were. The police are unsure whether the men were tsotsis or connected to the troubles. Stanford was popular in the bar lounge, but the barman said people teased him, saying he was a black, white man. His appearance and manner were different, and it may have made him a target for someone looking for trouble.'

'When did it happen?'

'Only last week. We are all in shock.'

'What about the judge?'

'He's also in shock.'

John couldn't prevent the sudden burning tears that filled his eyes. He loved Stanford. He was a father figure to him and a mentor to his mother. It was an unexpected loss, so hard to imagine. Stanford's absence left an enormous hole in the household. The servants looked up to him and relied on his wise counsel and guidance.

Dinner under Stanford's veranda roof was a solemn affair that evening. Norah and Philemon tried to make light chatter with John about his school, but Stanford's shadow hung heavy over the little sad group.

The next evening, at his traditional debrief with Judge Barclay, the mood was subdued.

'I never imagined I'd be without Stanford. He was younger than me, and I thought I'd be long gone before he passed on. I'm afraid we're not very good company right now, John. I've arranged for Mortimer to take you and your mother to the village tomorrow. He'll pick up your mother in two weeks' time and return for you a week before the end of your holiday. By then, we may be more settled, and your presence here will help lift everyone's mood. Is that all right?'

'Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.'

The long drive in the Bentley helped lift John and Norah's heavy hearts. The hum of the car's tyres on the asphalt main road, and the prospect of seeing Aneni and Tadiwa again, made them feel better. Norah smiled at John and held his hand when they reached the dusty road that led to the beer hall and on to the village. The familiarity was like a comforting balm to their souls.

At the sound of the car turning into the village, Tadiwa and Aneni rushed out to greet them. John and Norah felt strangely euphoric, arriving in the village. It was an intense sensation greater than they'd experienced on any of their earlier visits. Perhaps it was because they were coming out of the dark place after Stanford's murder.

John looked at Aneni. She was becoming a beautiful young woman. Norah and Tadiwa supported their relationship and wished their children would wed someday.

Later, John caught up with his friends, Simba, Takunda, and Chipo, but he soon realised he wanted to spend his time with Aneni rather than fooling around with the boys. When they were at last alone, he told Aneni of the various plans for his future.

'If you go to university, we must wait another three years before we marry. I'll be twenty-one years old then. Most girls have children by that age.'

'Aneni, I've seen how the white people live. They first secure their future through education and training. Then, they get married in their mid-twenties and have children in their late twenties. That is how they live so well. We'll also have a nice house and garden, and money to buy things and enjoy life. And universities have longer holidays than schools, so I will see more of you. We will have a wonderful life together.'

'Can't you go to university here in Salisbury?'

'Yes, but they're recommending me for Oxford, one of the best universities in the world. Anyway, it won't be for another three years.'

'You are clever, John. You know what's best for us, so I'll wait for you if I must.'

Time is perfidious. When you want it to go slow, it races, and when you want it to speed up, it drags. Norah's two weeks in the village passed in a flash, and a short two weeks later, Mortimer arrived to pick up John. The only consolation for John and Aneni was their agreed plan for their future together.

John missed his chats with Stanford, but now, as he matured, Judge Barclay filled that role. Pre-dinner chats in the lounge, sitting opposite the boss at his desk, were becoming the

norm, and he appreciated the keen interest the judge took in him. But dinner with his mother and Philemon still bore the weight of Stanford's absence, though to John's surprise, the old chef was an interesting conversationalist. Before, Stanford always dominated the discussions, and Philemon stayed in the background.

Thomas, the gardener, also proved to be more interesting than he previously thought. It seemed, in Stanford's absence, the household staff were blossoming, since they could no longer rely on their former boss for his instructions. Norah was now the head of staff in her role as housekeeper, but her style of management was more *laissez-faire*, using gentle guidance rather than strict orders.

As the boss suggested, John's presence helped to lift the mood of the household. But John was at a loose end while his mother and the staff were busy working. One afternoon, he stood on the pavement, looking up and down the avenue, when he noticed a girl in a school uniform ride towards him on her bicycle. She looked about his age and stopped when she reached him.

'Do you live here at Judge Barclay's house?'

'Yes.'

'What's your name?'

'John.'

'Don't you have a surname?'

'John Ziyambi.'

'I'm Ruth Levi. I live next door. Do you work for the judge?'

'No, my mother does.'

'Oh, yes, I think I've seen her.'

'So what do you do?'

'I go to school in England.'

'Oh! That's nice.'

Under normal circumstances, John would have regarded the questions as intrusive. But on this occasion, he didn't mind because the conversation, together with her short skirt, gave him the opportunity to study her long, shapely legs.

'Well, I'd better be going. See you then,' she said.

'Yeah, see you.' John watched as Ruth rode her bicycle to her garden gate before she alighted and pushed it up the path. He didn't find white girls to his taste. Their noses were too narrow and their faces too thin, but while Ruth Levi was the same, somehow, he found her attractive, most attractive.

Soon, John's long school break was over, and it was time to return to England. It had been a wonderful trip except for the tragic news of Stanford's passing. He'd grown up admiring the man, and he believed the butler's influence would serve him well throughout his life. Stanford was industrious and principled, and served as an ideal role model for him to follow.

Once more, Norah and Mortimer took John to the airport, waving goodbye from the terminal balcony. Norah knew from experience to bring a yellow scarf for John to spot them in the crowd. She'd learnt a lot in the ten years she worked for Judge Barclay, but John couldn't help worrying about how she'd cope without Stanford by her side.