

Chapter 20 – Moving On

In December 1974, John was back in Salisbury for the short Christmas break. As usual, he sat opposite Judge Barclay for the end of term debrief. The judge enjoyed his discussions with John, who was developing into a thoughtful young man with perspective, and capable of intelligent debate on issues of national importance.

‘What do you think of this South African sponsored ceasefire, Sir? Will it have any chance of succeeding?’

‘I have my doubts, John. Ceasefires don’t have a good record.’

‘But Zambia is also supporting it.’

‘I don’t see any advantage for Rhodesia in the ceasefire. The terms restrict the Rhodesian Security Forces to purely defensive patrols and confine the South African Police (SAP) to their camps. It will give the insurgents the opportunity to regroup. The villagers in the Tribal Trust Lands will see the African Nationalist leaders’ release as a victory for the insurgents, and the leaders will use it as a propaganda tool.’

‘But blacks outnumber whites in the Rhodesian Security Forces by over two to one. Won’t they be able to explain the situation to the villagers?’

‘African soldiers aren’t politicians, John. They don’t have the experience of influencing large numbers of villagers the way the nationalist leaders can.’

Later events proved Judge Barclay’s foresight correct.

Rumours of infighting amongst the ZANU leadership increased when, in March 1975, a car bomb planted in his Volkswagen Beetle killed Herbert Chitepo, the ZANU chairman. The infighting ramped up, with several experienced field commanders executed. Despite this, the Rhodesian Security Forces struggled to make up for lost ground resulting from the ill-conceived ceasefire.

Although the length and frequency of military call-ups increased, most Rhodesians remained optimistic about the future. The international sanctions imposed by The United Nations boosted local manufacturing and economic activity, with Rhodesian entrepreneurs taking advantage of the situation.

Judge Barclay’s household was unaffected, bar a few minor inconveniences. But all that was about to change.

With Stanford’s passing, Norah was now the head of staff, and Judge Barclay’s confidant in the household. They often discussed the situation in the country, with Norah proving to be a perceptive debater and sounding board. Her dinnertime chats with Stanford and Philemon under Stanford’s veranda roof were educational, helping her to view events with a greater level of understanding.

On a cold but sunny morning in early June, Judge Barclay sat at the breakfast table enjoying a leisurely breakfast while reading the newspaper. Norah poured him a cup of steaming hot tea.

‘Good heavens! Norah, have you seen this?’

‘What, Sir?’

‘It says here, a Ministry of Internal Affairs nurse and her driver were both killed when they drove over a landmine on a dirt road in the Umtali area. You don’t think that could be your Nurse Sandra, do you?’

‘Norah’s brow tightened into a knot. I don’t know, Sir. Sandra travelled to many areas on the Salisbury to Umtali road, but I don’t know how far along it she went. She said the department had lots of nurses. Many of them were African. I’ll phone her and check.’

Norah walked through to the kitchen and picked up the handset. She dialled Sandra’s number and drummed her fingers on the counter as the dialling tone sounded. The phone continued to ring. When Sandra was out shopping, Daisy, the maid, often answered the phone. On this occasion, there was no response.

Before lunch, Norah tried to call again, but there was no answer. In the afternoon, and later in the evening, Norah called without success. Now, she worried. Sandra seldom went away without letting her know. Perhaps she was out for the day. In her restless night, Norah willed the morning to come, when she’d try to phone Sandra again.

Norah was up early. She’d woken at six and couldn’t get back to sleep, so it was pointless staying in bed. She would phone Sandra straight after breakfast. On Sundays, the boss would have his breakfast at eight. He liked porridge in winter, followed by fried eggs and crispy bacon, and ending with buttered toast and marmalade. He’d always drink tea with breakfast, leaving coffee for mid-morning.

Footsteps alerted Norah to the boss’s arrival in the kitchen.

‘Norah, there’s someone on the phone for you. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but they mentioned your name.’

With a shaking hand, Norah picked up the receiver. ‘Hello.’

A shrill, quivering voice greeted her.

‘I’m sorry, but please slow down! I can’t understand what you are saying. Who’s speaking?’

‘Norah, it’s me, Daisy, Madam Sandra’s maid.’

‘Daisy!’

‘Madam Sandra is dead. Also, Andrew the driver.’

Norah felt the blood drain from her face, and her throat closed, threatening to choke her. She struggled to speak. How could this be true? First Stanford and now Sandra. She was losing her friends, the ones who welcomed her to Salisbury. The boss and Philemon were there, but suddenly she felt so lonely. Her face crumpled as the tears flowed.

After breakfast, Norah walked to the bus stop and caught the bus to Vainona, the suburb where Sandra lived. As she walked up to the house, she saw Daisy standing outside the front gate with a suitcase and cardboard box beside her.

‘Daisy, what are you doing?’

‘I’m going home to my village. My uncle is coming to pick me up and take me.’

‘But what about Sandra’s house?’

‘Two bosses came yesterday and gave me two hundred and twenty dollars from Madam Sandra and said I could leave whenever I wanted. They said they would take care of everything. I can’t stay here if Madam Sandra is not here. I’m too sad.’

Just then, an old truck pulled up alongside them, and the African driver waved to Daisy.

‘It’s my uncle. I must go now.’

‘Phone me if you need any help, Daisy.’

‘Yes, I will.’

Daisy’s uncle jumped down from the truck and loaded her suitcase and cardboard box in the back. Then he and Daisy climbed into the cab, gave Norah a wave, and drove off. Dejected, Norah trudged back to the bus stop on the Borrowdale Road. Daisy’s departure was so sudden, she’d not had time to ask her if she knew anything more about Sandra’s sad demise.

The Monday paper confirmed the landmine victims as Ms Sandra MacDonald and Mr Andrew Dambisa.

Less than a fortnight later, on 25th June, the Portuguese left Mozambique. From her discussions with the judge, Norah was aware of what that meant for Rhodesia’s security. Her idyllic world was under threat, and she feared for the future. John’s long, end-of-academic-year school holiday, a little over three weeks away, couldn’t come fast enough for her.

As John alighted from the plane at Salisbury Airport, he searched the terminal balcony to find his mother and Mortimer. There was no sign of them. Usually, he located them by scanning the crowd and finding the six-foot two Mortimer, and then, his mother standing by the chauffeur’s side.

John passed through immigration and customs with minimal delay and walked out to the arrival hall, where Norah stood, beaming at the sight of her son.

‘Hi Mum, where’s Mortimer?’

‘I drove myself.’

‘So, you’ve got your driving licence at last. Why did you wait so long?’

‘Until now, I didn’t need it.’

‘I’m surprised the judge allowed you to drive his precious Bentley.’

They walked out to the car park, where Norah opened the door of a shiny red Alfasud.

‘Wow! What’s this?’

‘It’s a brand-new Alfa Romeo. The judge bought it for me to use for shopping. I only got it this week.’

‘How is everyone?’

‘Everyone is fine, Philemon, Mortimer, Thomas, and Abigail.’

‘And the judge?’

‘He’s away in Johannesburg. Tomorrow morning, we’ll go in my car to the village. The judge has requested we return to Salisbury for the last five days of your holiday.’

‘Wow! He bought you a new car! Can you believe it!’

As Norah pulled up behind the Bentley in the driveway, she said, ‘You and I are now staying in the house’s guest wing.’

‘Because the judge is away?’

‘No, it’s permanent. The judge felt we should have our own rooms.’

‘Why can’t one of us move into Stanford’s quarters?’

‘The judge is keeping that for visitors, though I’ve never seen an overnight visitor in the ten years I’ve worked here. He said it was more convenient for us to stay in the house.’

‘And our old room?’

‘He’s converted it into a gym. He says he doesn’t get enough exercise. We’re also allowed to use it if we want.’

‘When did you move into the house?’

‘In April, just after your last visit.’

After greeting Philemon and eating a light supper, John fell into bed to recover from his long flight. Norah’s room was next door, but she stayed up to help Philemon tidy the kitchen before he left.

Next morning, John jumped out of bed with the energy of someone looking forward to spending the next five weeks at his favourite destination. He repacked his suitcase with fresh clothes that Norah transferred from their old room and dumped his dirty clothes in the wash basket. Within thirty minutes, he showered, dressed, and was ready.

After one of Philemon’s special breakfasts, Norah and John waved goodbye to the old chef and Abigail, the maid, before heading out onto the Umtali Road. It was a crisp July morning, and the little car buzzed along at a good pace. His mother’s driving impressed John, and he wondered if he could also get a driving licence. At sixteen years of age, he was eligible for a learner’s licence.

Tadiwa and Aneni were delighted to see them arrive in the little red car.

‘Norah, your luck gets better and better. The spirits have blessed you.’

‘It is my boss who has blessed me, Tadiwa.’

‘I never imagined you’d get such a good job in Salisbury, but you proved me wrong. How much more luck will you have?’

‘Remember, Tadiwa, you always said luck was a balance, good luck and bad. Sometimes, I worry about that.’

‘Don’t worry sister, you will always be lucky.’

The two women laughed, happy to be together again. Meanwhile, John and Aneni glowed with the prospect of five weeks together. Soon, their friends, Simba, Takunda, and Chitepo arrived to greet John and marvel at the Alfasud. John revelled in the thought of five lazy weeks ahead. When having fun, even lazy weeks can race by, and it was soon time to leave.

John looked at Aneni’s sad face and said, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon. And just imagine, next year will be my last long school holiday. Then, I’ll be at university, and the holidays will be longer.’

On the way back to Salisbury, John asked, ‘Mum, how come the judge gave you five weeks’ leave?’

‘He said I needed it after the events of the last couple of years.’

Back home, John took more notice of his new accommodation. A storage room stood between his bedroom and the bathroom at the rear of the house. Next door was his mother’s bedroom, and beyond that lay an empty room with windows facing the front and side. The hallway ran the length of the building, with doors leading to the entrance hall and the kitchen.

‘Who will stay in the third room?’

‘No one. The judge said you can use it as a study.’

Later that evening, Judge Barclay called John to the lounge for their traditional debrief. As usual, John’s school reports were excellent, and soon the discussion moved on to the situation in the country.

‘Sir, what do you think about the SAP withdrawing from Rhodesia?’

‘Vorster, the South African prime minister, may be trying to wash his hands of the situation in this country. He’d be naïve to imagine he could court favour with The West and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) by distancing himself from Rhodesia. The longer the Rhodesian situation keeps going, the longer South Africa will stay out of the spotlight.’

‘At school, I get lots of questions about the situation in Rhodesia.’

‘World opinion will never favour us, and if we lose South Africa, that will be it. For us and them.’

As always, John, Norah, and Philemon enjoyed their dinner under Stanford’s veranda roof. The full moon flooded the yard with light, making the need for electric lighting superfluous. The stars twinkled in the clear night sky, reminding John of the village. He mused it was nights like this that he missed at school in England.

Later, back in his room, John looked at the moon through his bedroom window. Its light, shining on his bedroom floor, receded as the moon moved overhead. Opposite his window, he noticed a gap in the tall hedge that ran along the drive. Thomas the gardener removed a dying bush in the hedge and not yet planted a replacement. Through the gap, John could see one of the neighbours’ windows. It was closer than he’d earlier realised, as all that stood between the two houses was the judge’s driveway and the neighbour’s narrow path. The tall hedge masked the view of the rest of the house next door.

John stood at his window watching the moon and the stars, dreaming about Aneni and their future together. As he watched, the moonlight crept up the neighbours’ wall before flooding the room.

Then John saw her. Ruth Levi stood at her bedroom window, looking at the moon. He’d not given her a thought since they met a year ago. But now, there she stood with the top half of her naked body bathed in the moonlight. John caught his breath. She reminded him of those ancient Roman marble statues he’d seen in the school history books, though this spectacular vision possessed arms. He thought she was the loveliest white girl he’d ever seen.

How long had she been standing there? Her room was in total darkness before the moon crept over the window sill. Had she seen him standing by his window, watching the moon? Did she realise he was watching her now? He liked the idea she might be teasing him with her taught youthful body. John had seen naked African women in his village, but until tonight, he’d never seen a naked white girl. He stood well back in his now darkened room, watching her until she drew the curtains.

The next night, John waited for the moon to creep up the neighbours’ wall, but it was almost an hour later, and Ruth Levi’s curtains were already closed.

John got into bed, and his thoughts soon returned to Aneni in the village. Sleep eluded him as he dreamed of their future together and pondered how the situation in the country might affect their lives. Through his mother’s efforts, he’d become accustomed to the Europeans’ way of life. He’d met his mother’s ambition for him to not be a village boy, but Aneni was still very much a village girl. As soon as he finished his studies, he’d bring her to Salisbury and introduce her to the life he’d long planned for them.

In the early hours, around three, John woke with a throbbing headache. His mum always kept a packet of Disprin in her bedside table drawer, so he jumped out of bed and walked barefoot on the cool parquet floor to her room. Norah’s door was ajar, and John opened it,

taking care to not make too much noise. He whispered, ‘Mum, are you awake?’ There was no response. He tiptoed into the room before he noticed her bed was empty.

John pulled open the bedside table drawer, but he couldn’t find the Disprin. Perhaps Norah was in the toilet or the kitchen, but when he checked, she wasn’t there either. He jumped back into bed, leaving his door ajar to see his mother when she passed.

An hour and a half later, John saw his mother’s white nightdress walk past his door. He leapt out of bed and hurried after her to ask for the Disprin.

‘Mum, I’ve got a headache, but I couldn’t find the Disprin in your bedside table drawer.’

‘Oh! I’m sorry, I must have left them in my handbag.’ Norah found the Disprin and handed two to John.

‘Where have you been? I waited ages for you. More than an hour.’

‘The judge wanted a drink, so I took him a mug of Milo.’

‘Can’t he get his own Milo?’

‘No, it’s my job to do that.’

‘I bet you Stanford never took him his Milo.’

‘Go back to bed now. You need to get some sleep.’

John returned to his bed, but he couldn’t sleep. He worried about his mother’s lengthy absence from her room, and it disturbed him to speculate on the reason.