

Chapter 21 – The Awakening

Easter Monday in April 1976 sent shock waves through the country. African nationalist insurgents shot and killed three South African tourists riding motorcycles just south of Nuanetsi, only one hundred and twenty kilometres north-east of Beit Bridge. The group's fourth member, a woman, was injured. The insurgents were robbing the occupants of three cars at dusk on the Fort Victoria to Beitbridge road when the two motorcycles carrying the four tourists arrived on the scene.

This attack was shocking because it occurred on a major highway connecting Salisbury to the South African Border, and it was the first such incident on a national main road. The following month saw the start of armed convoys on most of Rhodesia's major intercity roads. Thereafter, cars and lorries would congregate on the edge of the city, where armed military vehicles waited to escort the civilian traffic on their journey. Now, most Rhodesians realised the seriousness of the situation.

John returned to school in England a few days before Easter and missed the concern the incident created, but Norah worried about his future visits to Aneni. The convoys travelled the main road between Salisbury and Umtali, but there'd be no protection once they left the main road for the dirt road leading to the village.

Mortimer no longer drove them to the village in the shiny black Bentley, which would be an attractive target for any insurgent. But it didn't mean her little red Alfasud would be any safer. Stories of land mines planted in dirt roads abounded, increasing Norah's concerns. Worse still, insurgent activity in the Buhera District was increasing. Until now, the area remained quiet compared to other districts, but the situation was deteriorating.

With the departure of the Portuguese from Mozambique in June 1975, the insurgents gained easier access to the Buhera District, and the troubles arrived there in February 1976. Some traditional chiefs supported the government, but that placed them in danger with the insurgents. Anyone entering the area took a risk, and Norah feared John wouldn't forgo visiting Aneni during the upcoming long, end-of-academic-year school holiday.

Judge Barclay expressed his concerns to Norah. 'Your visits to the village are getting dangerous. Do you think you could persuade John to give it a miss this time?'

'I don't think so, Sir. He'd take any risk to see Aneni.'

'Why not bring her and her mother here? They could stay in Stanford's old quarters.'

'I will talk to Tadiwa, Sir.'

'They could stay as long as the situation remains so serious.'

'I will talk to her, Sir, but I must go to the village to persuade her. We must risk the drive once more.'

The next eight weeks passed, and the news about the insurgency and the Buhera District did not improve. It was difficult for the city dwellers to know the precise happenings in the Tribal Trust Lands. John was due home soon, and he and Norah would visit Tadiwa and Aneni and learn first-hand about the situation there.

When John arrived and heard about the judge's suggestion, he was overjoyed. 'It's a fantastic idea, Mum. Aneni will love it here in Salisbury.'

‘Well, let’s hear what Tadiwa says.’

‘I’m sure she’ll love it as well.’

After two days in Salisbury and his traditional debrief with the judge, John and Norah rose early for their drive to the village. Philemon prepared a hearty breakfast to see them on their way. They drove to the edge of the city to join the Umtali convoy, which was scheduled to assemble at a quarter to eight for an eight-fifteen departure. Norah drove in the rush hour traffic and worried they would be late, but her concern was unwarranted, arriving in plenty of time.

At the assembly point, the armed-escort commander instructed them about the convoy’s speed, the safe distance between vehicles, and the need to stay in single file and not lag. Norah notified the commander about them leaving the convoy at Inyazura, near the Buhera turnoff. His response was not encouraging. ‘Well, that’s your funeral! If you leave the convoy, there’s nothing more we can do to help you. Go to the end of the queue, and I’ll warn the rear escort you are turning off for Buhera. But you better indicate early to remind him when you are turning.’ With that, the escort commander walked along the row of vehicles and got into the front armed-escort vehicle.

‘That’s good, Mum. If we’re next to the armed-escort vehicle, the insurgents are less likely to target us.’

‘Do you really think so?’ Norah frowned, questioning his reasoning.

‘Will you stay for the five weeks, or must you return to Salisbury before me?’

‘No, the judge has given me the full five weeks. He doesn’t want me travelling on the roads any more than necessary.’

Soon, they were on their way, moving at a steady pace. It wasn’t like the carefree country drive they last experienced when heading to the village. Travelling in convoy engendered a sense of danger, making them aware of the potential for an ambush. Norah found driving in a convoy more difficult than she expected. She needed to concentrate, to avoid driving into the rear of the car in front or risk being rear-ended by the escort vehicle.

The drive to the turnoff seemed quicker than usual because of Norah’s intense focus on her driving. A kilometre before the turnoff, she remembered to indicate she was about to leave the convoy. With no oncoming cars, she turned without stopping and holding up the escort vehicle behind them. Because of the convoys, and concerns about driving unprotected through the countryside, fewer lone cars travelled the road.

On the dirt road, Norah slowed the car to a crawl, straining her eyes for any sign the road surface had been disturbed. She’d read the insurgents excelled at disguising the sites where they’d planted the landmines and often followed up the detonation, attacking with their AK-47s. The thick bush on both sides of the dirt road meant they wouldn’t see the insurgents lying in ambush. Every minute of the drive proved stressful, making it seem much longer than normal, but eventually they drove past the beerhall and arrived at the village.

Tadiwa and Aneni hurried out of their hut to greet them. Norah surprised Tadiwa when she mentioned the stressful drive. In the village, they’d not experienced any insurgent activity in the area, and they thought the entire situation was exaggerated.

‘Believe me, Tadiwa, things are worse than you realise. We get a lot of news in the city, which you might not hear. How do you know the insurgents aren’t nearby?’

‘Norah, you know how fast news travels in the bush! If there were insurgents anywhere near here, we’d all know about it.’

Tadiwa’s words reassured Norah. Perhaps her friend was right. She was local and would know the situation better than anyone outside the area. Over the next few days, Norah noticed the villagers all appeared relaxed, going about their business, so she stopped worrying and thereafter enjoyed her break.

Norah cherished the evenings by the fire, chatting while sipping tea or Chibuku bought from the beerhall. One week into her holiday, she thought it was time to talk to Tadiwa about Salisbury. She’d warned John to not say anything to Aneni until she’d spoken to Tadiwa, as her friend could be stubborn if not consulted first.

‘Tadiwa, have you ever thought of visiting the city?’

‘No, my husband, Michael, says the city is full of tsotsis and no place for women.’

‘Wouldn’t you like to see where I live?’

Tadiwa shrugged.

‘My boss says you and Aneni can visit us and stay in the rooms in the garden.’

‘How can I visit you?’

‘We can take you and Aneni in the car with us when we leave.’

‘How long must we stay with you?’

‘As long as you like. My boss says you can stay until the troubles are over.’

‘Eish! There is no trouble for us here.’

‘So will you come?’

‘I must stay and look after my crops, or we’ll starve.’

‘Can’t someone look after your crops while you’re away? And before you return to the village, I’ll buy you more corn than you can grow.’

‘I must first talk to Michael.’

‘Can you phone him from the beerhall?’

‘No, I’ll talk to him when he comes home at Christmas.’

‘If you and Aneni were in Salisbury, Michael could see you more often.’

‘I’ll speak to Michael.’

Norah recognised Tadiwa’s signal that the discussion was over. Later, when alone in their hut, John was eager to know Tadiwa’s response.

‘Well, Mum, is it arranged for Aneni and Tadiwa to come to Salisbury?’

‘You must be patient, John. Tadiwa will talk to Michael, her husband.’

Three days before Norah and John were due to leave the village, rumours swirled about insurgent activity in a neighbouring chief’s area. Norah renewed her efforts to persuade Tadiwa to reconsider the invitation for her and Aneni to go with them to Salisbury. John also tried to influence the situation by talking to Aneni about it. But Tadiwa was adamant that she couldn’t make such a decision without Michael’s approval.

John reminded Aneni, the break between school and university was eleven weeks, so they could look forward to that. ‘But before then, I’ll see you at Christmas, Aneni, and again in March. The time will soon pass.’

Disappointed, John and Norah left the village without Tadiwa and Aneni accompanying them to Salisbury.

Judge Barclay became concerned about Norah and John's visits to the village. 'It's not safe Norah. You and John shouldn't risk those lonely roads.'

'Sir, how can I stop John from visiting Aneni? He wouldn't listen to me if I suggested he shouldn't go.'

The ongoing debate with Judge Barclay continued over several days until Norah came up with a suggestion. 'If I find out the next beerhall delivery, I can follow the lorry. So, if the road is mined, they will explode it.'

'Good cynical thinking, Norah, but what about the return trip?'

'Well, Sir, half the trip will be safe. The villagers will notice insurgents in the area and will warn us to be extra careful.'

'You'll have to time your return to coincide with the convoy heading to Salisbury.'

'Yes, Sir, we will.'

First thing the next morning, Norah phoned the various suppliers about their Christmas deliveries to the beer hall. The suppliers suspected her motives, thinking she may be setting up an ambush by the insurgents. So the next morning, she got Judge Barclay to make the calls and explain the reason for them.

One supplier had scheduled a delivery for the morning after John's evening arrival a week before Christmas. It was a small panel van making a delivery solely to the beer hall. It would travel with the convoy until the beer hall's turnoff, and Norah was welcome to follow. The timing meant that John's debrief with the judge would have to wait until the end of his school Christmas break.

John arrived for the Christmas holiday full of cheer. He could see the end of his school days, and although he'd loved his time there, he looked forward to the next stage of his life. The extra-long university breaks played no small part in this. Months with Aneni sounded a lot more attractive than weeks with her.

Norah's plan for the drive to the village worked without a hitch, and neither the Alfasud nor the panel van in front triggered a landmine. John enjoyed his time with his friends, Simba, Takunda, and Chipso, but spent most of his time with Aneni.

Aneni's father, Michael, was visiting for Christmas, and John hoped he'd agree to Aneni and Tadiwa staying with them in Salisbury. His hopes were dashed when Michael was unshakeable in his view his wife and daughter should remain in the village. Even Norah's pleas made no difference to his obstinate stance.

'Just imagine, Aneni, my April holiday will be our last short break together. After that, we'll have eleven weeks before university starts. And remember, the end-of-term breaks at university will be six weeks, and the end-of-year breaks, sixteen weeks. We'll have heaps of time together.'

John's words buoyed Aneni when the time came for him to leave. Norah and John waved through the open windows of the car as they drove out of the village. Aneni watched the car disappear into the thick bush and continued to watch until the dust it created on the dirt road settled in the distance.

In Salisbury, the night before John's departure, Judge Barclay called him to the lounge for their traditional debrief, which they'd earlier missed.

'You're writing your A-Level exams in June, aren't you, John?'

‘June or July, Sir.’

‘You appreciate how important they are?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘For that reason, I’m not bringing you home for your March/April school holiday.’

John’s face fell. ‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Your headmaster, my old friend, Sebastian Bromley, tells me he is expecting you to get distinctions in all your subjects. He believes you will have no trouble gaining entry to Oxford University to study for your Bachelor of Arts degree. I’ve spoken to your mother, and we’ll put in an application for you. You’ll have plenty of time from late July to early October to visit the village.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

The news was a blow to John. The limited time between his arrival and the drive to the village prevented his usual debrief with the judge. If he’d known beforehand, he could have prepared Aneni for the news. Now, they wouldn’t be together again until late July at the earliest. It was a subdued John who boarded the Viscount for his trip back to school.

Only a week after he returned to England, the beerhall near the village burnt to the ground. Rumours swirled about insurgent activity or an electrical fault. The authorities never confirmed what caused the beerhall blaze and had no plans to rebuild it.