

## Chapter 23 – And Now

Norah reversed the Alfasud out of the driveway as John waved goodbye to Judge Barclay, Philemon, and Mortimer. He'd long waited for this moment. Soon, he'd be with Aneni for a whole nine weeks before starting his first semester at Oxford University. The A-level results wouldn't be released for another couple of weeks, but seeing Aneni took priority. No doubt, his mother would somehow get the results to him in the village.

'Have you got all your papers, your passbook?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'It's just as well you left your English passport safe at home with me. You don't want to lose it in these uncertain times.'

'Where do you get these fancy words from, Mum? "Just as well, uncertain times." You haven't used those words before.'

'I've been working for Hugh for almost fourteen years. He, and before him, Stanford, always corrected my grammar and the words I used. They have been my university, just as Oxford will soon be yours. And I also read a lot, which helps me learn new words and expressions. Each year, my English improves at a faster rate.'

'The judge has also helped me a lot.'

'He's good to you, as if you were his son. Hugh never had children of his own, so you are his favoured one.'

The clock on the Alfasud's dashboard showed a quarter to eight as they approached the convoy assembly point. The bus that would carry John to the village turnoff was already there. Norah parked the car, and they walked to the bus for John to buy a ticket and claim a seat.

The officer leading the convoy stood at the bottom of the steps, talking to the bus driver. When Norah and John approached, he recognised them.

'Ah! I know you two. Are you going to Buhera again?'

'Just my son this time.'

The officer looked at John. 'How are you going to get to your village?'

'I'll walk.'

'You know there's terrorist activity in the area?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Well, you better be careful. Have you got your passbook?'

John handed his passbook to the officer, who glanced at it and handed it back.

'Tell the driver where you are leaving the convoy. We don't stop unless you advise us in advance. I'll let the rear armed vehicle know.'

'Yes, Sir.'

John heaved his backpack onto the seat behind the driver and explained he was heading to the dirt road turnoff leading to his village in the Buhera District. He paid his fare before coming down the steps to say goodbye to Norah.

'Now you will be careful, John, won't you?'

'Yes, Mum, of course I will.'

'If you see anyone walking towards you on the road, hide in the bushes until they pass.'

‘Does that include women and children?’

‘Yes, anyone can be a Mujiba. They help the insurgents and inform on the villagers.’

‘OK, I’ll be careful.’

‘Persuade Tadiwa and Aneni to come to Salisbury until the troubles end.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘It’s a long walk, and you’ll have to spend the night somewhere.’

‘I’ll sleep in the bush, Mum. Don’t worry, I’ll be alright.’

John hugged his mother and boarded the bus. The engine started with a roar, and its vibration shook the old buses’ dented panels. Norah stood on the pavement, waving goodbye to him as the vehicles in the convoy moved off, one by one. She stayed, watching the convoy disappear into the distance. It was many years since she’d not gone with him to visit Tadiwa and Aneni. She got back into her car and drove home, feeling a little lonely. Still, John would return in about nine weeks’ time.

The convoy moved at a good pace. John watched the scenery race past his window, transforming from outer suburbs to bush. The bus was empty compared to normal. The driver explained people were undertaking only essential trips during the heightened insurgent activity. Usually, the bus would be packed with villagers, some with livestock, heading home from a city market visit. The roof would be piled high, with the passengers’ goods threatening to overturn the top-heavy old vehicle.

With stops at small towns to add more vehicles to the convoy, it was past midday by the time John arrived at his village turnoff near Inyazura. He grabbed his backpack and wasted no time getting on his way. In his backpack were a change of clothes, the sandwiches Philemon prepared for him, two cans of Coke, and the orange scarf he’d bought for Aneni. There was also Norah’s small gift for Tadiwa.

Feeling energised, John strode along the dirt road. The thought of seeing Aneni lightened the prospect of an arduous walk. A night in the bush didn’t concern him. He’d walk a thousand kilometres to be with her.

The deserted road gave him a sense of freedom, with no one to witness his progress. He whistled and sang to himself as he marched along the uneven surface. The surrounding bush was quiet, though he wasn’t conscious of it at first. But as the evening shadows lengthened, he noticed the silence. No chirping of birds, the barking of village dogs somewhere in the distance, or the bray of a roaming village donkey. Not even the buzzing of insects disturbed the overwhelming silence.

A long-abandoned, burnt-out hut, one hundred metres from the road, caught his attention. It looked a suitable spot to spend the night. John stepped off the road into the bush. The winter-dried grass crunched under his shoes as he made his way to the derelict dwelling.

The thatched roof of the doorless hut was long gone. They would have been the fire’s first casualties. But the intact walls would help protect against the chilly late-night winds. He never thought to bring a lightweight sleeping bag. It would have made all the difference. A hard earthen floor and mud walls don’t give any opportunity for comfort. His khaki padded jacket and green baseball cap were all the added protection he could muster.

Exhausted from his long walk, John soon fell into a deep sleep. The moon had risen early and set soon after midnight. The star-studded sky looked down upon him, but he was unaware of it. With no moon, the bush was pitch black. He dreamt of his schooldays, chatting with his

friends, and taking part in school sports. But the chatter subsided, to be replaced by hushed whispers. From deep sleep to alert wakefulness; what had woken him? He strained his ears for any sound, but all he could hear was the thumping of his own heart.

Were the hushed whispers part of his dream, or were they real? John couldn't be sure. He lay, listening for any hint of sound, not daring to breathe in case it drowned out any external threat. How long he lay awake and alert, he couldn't tell, but a short time later, the faint glow of dawn kissed the horizon.

As soon as it was light, John forced his stiff body to rise and stretch to meet the day. His mind returned to the hushed voices in the early hours. He looked over the low hut walls, scanning the surrounding bush for any sign of life. There was nothing he could see. But when he grabbed his backpack and exited the hut, he saw the light footprints in the sandy soil. Tackies or veldskoens, the ubiquitous Rhodesian, grey suede ankle-length boots, could have made them. He was aware ZANLA fighters favoured the lightweight footwear for mobility in the bush. John imagined heavy army boots would have disturbed the soil with deeper prints.

More cautious now, he returned to the road and resumed his journey to the village with greater urgency. His mother's warning about strangers on the road rang in his ears, and he was keen to avoid an encounter with a group of over-zealous insurgents.

In the late afternoon, he stopped to rest in the part-shade of a tree. He searched his backpack for the last of the sandwiches Philemon made him. It was only a ham sandwich, but hunger makes everything taste delicious, and Philemon had spiced it up with a smear of English mustard.

As he swallowed the remnants of his second Coke, he noticed a cloud of dust approaching from the way he had come. John hurried into the bushes but then realised the two vehicles were the military green of the Rhodesian Security Forces. He had nothing to hide and would appreciate a lift, so he ran onto the road and raised the thumb of his right hand.

The vehicles skidded to a halt. A Land Rover with two occupants led the way, followed by a lorry with half a dozen soldiers. The soldiers leapt from the vehicles, scattering into the bush, dropping to the ground with their rifles at the ready. It was only a minute or two, but seemed longer, before one approached John.

The corporal looked him up and down. 'What are you doing here? Are you a terr?'

'No, I'm not a terrorist.'

'Who else is here?'

'No one.'

A second man came up to John. 'Are you asking to be shot? There are terrorists active in this area. When you came charging out of the bush, you were lucky we didn't open fire.'

'I'm sorry I startled you, but I didn't want to miss the chance of a lift.'

'Where's your passbook?'

John handed the passbook to the officer.

'I see you're from this area. Where are you going?'

'I'm going to my village to see my girlfriend.'

'You're crazy! No girlfriend is worth your life. If we didn't shoot you, the terrs might have. What's in your bag?'

'Just my clothes and presents for my girlfriend and her mother.'

'Corporal, search his bag. Where did you get your fancy accent?'

‘I went to school in England, and after the holidays, I’m going to Oxford University.’  
‘There’s nothing in the bag, Sir, but he might still be a terr. I think we should slot him.’  
‘Enough of your sick jokes, corporal. He doesn’t look like a terr to me.’  
‘But look, Sir, he’s made our uniforms dirty from lying on the ground.’  
The officer turned to John. ‘I take it you want a lift?’  
‘Yes, Sir.’

‘OK, hop into the back of the Land Rover. In future, if you want to stop an army vehicle, stand still on the edge of the road with your hands aloft and palms facing forward. Make sure you’re not holding anything. That way, you’re less likely to get shot.’

The Land Rover bumped, rattled, and bounced its way along the dirt track. It was unlike the drive in the Bentley or Alfasud, but then Mortimer and his mother took care to avoid the worst potholes and rocks.

When they arrived at the beerhall’s burnt-out shell, the vehicles stopped to let John get out. He thanked the officer for the lift, and the officer gave him a warning. ‘I wouldn’t stay in this area too long if I were you. It’s not safe. Take your girlfriend back to Salisbury with you.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Just past the beerhall, the vehicles drove to the right where the road forked, heading deeper into the Buhera District. The grinning corporal in the lorry waved as they passed. John heaved on his backpack and took the left fork. He strode out, eager to get to the village and Aneni. From the fork in the road, the village was a half-hour walk.

John breathed in the fresh evening air and quickened his pace, enjoying the familiarity of the surrounding bush. He was coming home, and more importantly, coming home to Aneni. He pictured how she’d look when she saw him, her delighted smile and sparkling eyes. Nine wonderful weeks together, at last. He could hardly believe it.

As he rounded the bend in the road, he took a deep breath to get a whiff of the intoxicating smell of the village fires that signalled he was home. There was nothing. Perhaps the wind was blowing in the wrong direction.

The village came into sight. Strange! In the evening, the village was always full of activity, with the women preparing the evening meals over open fires. And there’d be the shouts and laughter of children running and playing. But now, the village was silent. Not a soul to be seen. No village dogs running up to welcome him with their wagging tails. Where was everybody?

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