

## Chapter 24 – That’s Life

John walked into the village, keeping an eye out for any sign of trouble. Nobody about, no animals. Something must be wrong. Down the row of huts, a cough betrayed the presence of someone. The villagers were hiding, or illness had taken hold.

The first hut on the lefthand side belonged to Tadiwa and Aneni, and his mother’s locked hut next door was the second. John walked up to Tadiwa’s wooden door and knocked. With no response, he knocked a little louder. The old door creaked open an inch and then flung wide as Tadiwa rushed out to hug him.

‘Mauya, praise The Lord, you’ve come.’

‘Aunty, where is everyone.? What’s happened?’

‘Oh! Terrible, terrible! Wicked men came here. Evil men.’

‘The terrorists came here?’

‘Yes, they beat us and cut Aneni.’

‘What do you mean, cut Aneni? How is she? I must see her.’

‘No, wait, Mauya. She is too bad. Too much cutting.’

‘I must talk to her.’

‘Wait, I will ask her if she’ll come to you.’

‘When did this happen? Has she seen a doctor?’

‘Three days ago, but there is no doctor near here anymore. Everyone has run away.’

‘Let me see her.’

‘Wait here. I’ll talk to her.’

Tadiwa hurried back into her hut, but nothing happened for ten minutes. John paced in circles before Aneni appeared in the open doorway. A scarf covered her face. He rushed to her, but she backed away. ‘No! wait! Don’t come near me.’ Aneni’s beautiful eyes showed her pain.

‘Aneni, show me your cuts. You might get an infection. We must go to find a doctor.’

‘No, I cannot leave here.’

‘But a doctor can help you.’

‘No one can help me.’

‘Let me see your cuts.’

‘You will run away from me. I couldn’t bear that.’

‘I will never run away from you. Show me, please.’

‘You will hate me.’

‘Never, never will I hate you. I don’t care how bad your cuts are. I will never leave you.’

‘You will not like my face.’

‘I will always love your face, no matter how scarred.’

Aneni lowered her scarf, and John gasped in horror, his face betraying his reaction. Aneni burst into tears and ran back into her hut, slamming the door behind her. Earlier, after he spoke to Tadiwa, John steeled himself, determined not to react to what he might see. But what confronted him was beyond what he imagined. Aneni’s lips had been cut off, so her teeth would always be visible, and both her ears were missing. The mutilation was recent, with the

wounds bloody and her face swollen. John cursed himself for not better preparing for the sight.

A few moments later, Tadiwa emerged from the hut.

‘Tadiwa, please tell Aneni it’s OK. I will take her to England to get her face fixed. They have doctors there who do miracles. Tell her it will be alright. My whole life, I have dreamed of marrying her. This will not change my mind.’

‘I will tell her, but she is too sad.’

‘Why did these men cut her?’

‘They wanted her to go with them to Mozambique to join the struggle. She refused to go, so they cut her.’

‘They cut her for that?’

‘The strangers were looking for recruits. Simba and Takunda agreed to go with them. The gang leader told Simba and Takunda they must prove themselves by cutting Aneni with the sharp tool they carried.’

‘Simba and Takunda did that?’

‘Yes, they must have been afraid.’

‘How could they do that when they’ve known her all their lives? What about Chipo?’

‘Chipo ran when the evil men came. He never witnessed what happened, and no one has seen him since then. The government wants us to go into a protected village, but it hasn’t happened yet.’

‘Have you reported this to the authorities?’

‘No one has come. The villagers are afraid to seek help.’

‘Please don’t forget to tell Aneni about everything I said.’

‘I will tell her. Perhaps she will talk to you tomorrow. Tonight, I will cook for you.’

John unlocked the door to his mother’s hut where he would spend the night. It was infested with fleas, which was common for unoccupied dwellings. He sprayed the room with the insect repellent Norah kept in the hut, and stepped outside to give the pungent odour time to dissipate. As the darkness descended, the empty village presented a surreal scene. It wasn’t the picture he held in his mind whenever he was away.

Later, he and Tadiwa sat by the fire, eating their evening meal and talking about the misfortune that befell the community. Aneni wouldn’t join them, preferring to eat her meal in her hut. The night was pitch black, exaggerating the spit and crackle of the fire.

‘Where are all the villagers? I’ve seen no one since my arrival.’

‘They’re afraid those terrible people might return. Since the day they came, everybody eats at lunchtime and stays in their hut until the next morning.’

John produced a brown paper parcel tied with string. ‘I have brought Aneni an orange woollen scarf from England. Please tell her it binds my love to her for eternity. And there’s also a pair of gloves my mother sent for you.’

After dinner, Tadiwa returned to her hut to be with Aneni. John stayed a while, watching the flames of the fire die down and the embers glow with the intensity of his anger towards Simba and Takunda. He went back to his hut but struggled to sleep. All he thought about were the injuries Simba and Takunda inflicted upon Aneni. How could they do that to her? John’s anger boiled inside him, his childhood friends, friends no more.

John lay in the darkness, his thoughts bouncing in all directions. Would the judge pay for Aneni to go to England for plastic surgery? He'd seen photos of World War II pilots looking quite normal after horrific burns on their faces, and he was sure the surgeons could also help her. John's thoughts ricocheted between his anger towards Simba and Takunda, and how he would support Aneni through the traumatic process of rebuilding her face.

If she accompanied him to England for her plastic surgery, it would mean many months, if not years, of treatment. They'd get married, and while she underwent her treatment, he'd complete his studies at Oxford. The thought gave him a small ray of hope. He would talk to Aneni and Tadiwa about it in the morning. And he didn't believe her father, Michael, would withhold his approval this time.

At some point, John dozed off, but early in the morning, around four-thirty, he heard the creak of Tadiwa's front door. He assumed someone was paying an early morning visit to the bush toilet. The physical and emotional strain of the previous day overwhelmed him, and he slipped back into a restless sleep.

A loud banging on his door woke John. In the darkness of the windowless hut, he glanced at the luminous dial on his wristwatch. Six o'clock. He jumped out of bed and opened the door. A frantic Tadiwa faced him. Mauya, have you seen Aneni? Is she with you?

'No, she's not here.'

'I can't find her anywhere.'

'We must search for her. Will the villagers help?'

'I will ask them. We must hurry. I am so worried.'

John hurried to dress while Tadiwa banged on the doors of all the huts. Soon, a small crowd of a dozen villagers gathered, and after a brief discussion, they all dispersed to search in different parts of the surrounding area.

No one bothered with breakfast as they searched the bushes, the ditches, and the paths leading away from the village. All morning, the search continued with no sign of her. The grey cool day reflected the mood of the villagers, who refused to give up their search.

Then, in the late afternoon, a loud wail came from the river. Two women stood there shouting and waving to attract the others. John raced towards them, his chest tightening with every stride.

The women stood on the riverbank, pointing to something. A shoe lay there, submerged in the water. Something else bobbed in the reeds. John felt the blood drain from his face. It was an orange scarf, the scarf he bought for Aneni.

Now all the villagers searched the riverbank, and two kilometres downstream, they found her trapped in a thick growth of reeds. John rushed into the water waist deep and dragged Aneni's body from the flow.

He lay her on the ground, looking in vain for signs of life. But clearly, she'd been dead for a considerable time. The village women wailed, and John's tears flowed. This added distress was too much for the traumatised villagers to bear. John struggled to breathe as his chest heaved and his throat closed before an overwhelming emptiness flooded over him.

John carried Aneni's body back to Tadiwa's hut, followed by a string of weeping villagers. He laid her on her bed and kissed her on her forehead. On his way out of the hut, he kissed Tadiwa on the cheek.

She was inconsolable, and John, who'd not eaten all day, walked behind his mother's hut to retch and bring up bile. Crying and wails came from several of the huts, but John heard nothing as his own sobs drowned them out.

How could he sleep? How could he live on without Aneni? He planned his entire future around her, and now life was meaningless, and he wanted to die. Nothing meant anything to him anymore. Neither he nor Tadiwa ate that night, as food was far from their minds.

John lay on his bed with his thoughts all jumbled. He remembered the creaking door early in the morning and realised it was Aneni going to the river to end her life. Tiredness had overwhelmed him, but what a price he paid! If only he'd checked who was leaving the hut. He would have told her about his plan to marry her before taking her to England to have her injuries treated. It may have given her hope, and she'd be alive now. He'd never forgive himself for sleeping while Aneni drowned.

It was a fitful night's sleep for John. He woke several times to the horror of his loss, sometimes thinking it was all a dream. Each time he woke, he remembered. As the night progressed, his anguish turned into a burning desire for vengeance. Simba and Takunda would rue the day they came across him again.

Four-thirty yesterday was the time he'd heard Aneni leave her hut. Now, four-thirty today, he could stand it no more. John felt like his temples were clamped in a vice, and his eyes burned. He jumped out of bed and got dressed.

At six o'clock, the village stirred. Tadiwa knocked on John's door to wake him, but then noticed the padlock through the bolt on the hut's door. He was gone. It presented Tadiwa with renewed anguish, as she would need to bear her agony alone.