

Chapter 25 – The Path

John stood on the platform at Inyazura Station, waiting for the train to Umtali. The late-night, early spring winds whistled through the small, exposed platform, and he shuddered, pulling up his jacket collar to protect his neck. He was grateful for his padded jacket, but it was over two hours before the train's scheduled arrival, and he looked for a more sheltered spot. After determining the wind's direction, he backed himself into a corner that afforded a little more protection from the chilly breeze.

While he waited, John's thoughts drifted back to the events of the last few days. He couldn't bear to stay in the village to see Aneni's body buried in the earth. Would Tadiwa find a coffin in these troubled times? Where? Was a priest available to preside over the burial? Even if they were available, he couldn't imagine himself standing at the funeral, watching his Aneni disappear forever.

On his way to the village, John was by nature a patient and happy person, but that John died along with Aneni. He no longer had any patience left in him. No, he wouldn't wait for a future chance encounter with Simba or Takunda. Now, he wanted them dead, dead on his timing, not that of fickle fate.

John had walked for two days to reach Inyazura. He stopped only once for a brief nap, resting against the cold trunk of a large tree. It was enough to freeze his aching joints and encourage him to be on his way. On his long walk, he saw no one, and no convenient army vehicle to give him a lift. It somehow reflected the turn of events in his life, and nothing seemed to favour him anymore.

He could have caught the train to Salisbury and return to his comfortable life at Judge Barclay's house. But he'd built that life around Aneni, and a future now beyond his reach. Going straight home would never heal his wounds.

So, he'd head in the opposite direction to Umtali, but what was his next step? The guerrillas ordered Aneni's mutilation because she wouldn't go with them to Mozambique, so if he had any hope of finding Simba and Takunda, it would be there.

Earlier, in Inyazura, he'd bought a hot meat-pie, a Coke, and two peanut bars. He wasn't hungry, but was tired and dirty.

'You're going to Umtali?' The question interrupted John's thoughts. He hadn't noticed the young man, about his own age, standing to one side.

'Yes, I am.'

'Me too.'

John didn't respond any further to the young man's attempt to strike up a conversation, but the stranger wasn't deterred.

'Why are you going to Umtali?'

'I've never been there. I'd like to see it.'

'You're going sightseeing in the middle of a war?'

'It's an insurgency. That's all.'

'I have friends who went to Mozambique to join the guerrillas.'

'Is that where you're going?'

‘I’m going to help my uncle on his farm. It’s so close to Mozambique, it would be easy to go across the border if one wished.’

‘Wouldn’t there be Rhodesian Army soldiers protecting the border?’

‘Yes, but what I mean is, easy if you know what you’re doing. My uncle and I grew up in the area, so we’d have no trouble avoiding the soldiers. If you want, I can show you.’

‘What makes you think I want to cross the border?’

‘No, I mean show you, just out of interest.’

‘You’re asking me if I would like to risk my life, just out of interest?’

‘Well, it might be fun.’

At last, the whistle of the train announced its imminent arrival. The Garratt locomotive lumbered past before squealing to a halt and emitting a loud hiss, flooding the platform with the smell of burning coal. The carriages clanged as they concertinaed to a stop behind the hissing steam engine. John clambered up the steps of a fourth-class carriage and found a seat. The young stranger sat down next to him. ‘So, what do you say? Should we have a little fun?’

‘Be careful what you’re saying. Someone could overhear you.’

‘My name is Samuel.’

‘I’m John.’

‘The insurgents all have war names to protect their identity. What war name would you give yourself?’

‘I’m not sure. Wouldn’t the commanders choose your war name?’

‘Where are you staying in Umtali?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘My uncle is picking me up to go help on the farm. You could come with us. If you hang around in Umtali, the Rhodesian soldiers will be on to you. These days, blacks don’t visit Umtali for no good reason. They’ll think you’re looking to join the guerrillas and give you a hard time.’

‘I don’t know ...’

‘C’mon, you’ve got nothing to lose. If you don’t like my uncle’s farm, you can always return to Umtali or go over the top.’

‘Over the top?’

‘Yes, to Mozambique. You don’t fool me, John. I know what you’re up to. If I can suss you out, the soldiers will have no trouble.’

‘They’d have to prove it.’

‘Are you kidding? Listen, I’m on the same path as you. We can go together. I know how to do it. Do you?’

‘I’m not committing to anything. I might think about helping your uncle on the farm, but that doesn’t mean I’ll go with you to Mozambique.’

‘OK, but if the soldiers question us, we’ll say you’re my cousin. Right?’

‘Yeah, OK.’

The carriage rattled through the night, rocking at times in sections needing track work. Squealing metal announced the stops for passengers to get on or off, and often violent jerks signalled the train was resuming its journey. The occasional haunting, lonely whistle of the Garratt locomotive warned someone or something of its approach.

John's eyelids were heavy, but as Samuel dozed, he felt the cold creeping into his bones. The young man's incessant chatter had distracted him from his uncomfortable surroundings, but now, only his own thoughts distracted him. Could Samuel really take him to a guerrilla camp in Mozambique? Might it be a trap? The government also had their spies.

Stiff joints greeted John when he woke. The carriage windows added to the chill like an open fridge door. At six in the morning, sunrise was about twenty minutes away. But there was enough light for him to view the passing bush. It looked greener than the vegetation surrounding his village, where the low rainfall and sandy soil gave the bush a drier and greyer appearance.

'It'll be another hour,' said Samuel, not bothering to open his eyes. 'Try to get some more sleep.'

Umtali couldn't come soon enough for John. He was used to travelling in comfort, pampered by chauffeurs and air hostesses. Fourth class was not his thing. How could he sleep when he felt so cold?

Soon, they rolled into Umtali Station, and the train clanged to a halt at the platform. The slamming carriage doors and the screech of opening windows were the sounds of passengers hurrying to leave the train. John didn't understand the need to rush to leave the mode of transport, either here at the station or at the airports he'd visited.

On the platform, he noticed the ubiquitous Rhodesian soldiers alighting from the first and second-class carriages. Walking with Samuel from the station platform onto the street, John felt like all eyes were on him, aware of his plans. But no one paid any attention to them as they left the station and walked along Railway Street towards the city centre.

A couple of blocks from the station, Samuel led John into a shop that repaired bicycles and sold second-hand furniture.

'Wait here! I'll see if my uncle has arrived.'

The African serving staff knew Samuel, who greeted them as he walked through the shop to the rear. A few minutes later, he returned with an amiable-looking man, who introduced himself as Isaak. He shook hands with John, his broad smile hinting at a shared unspoken understanding. 'So, you are another of my nephews come to work on my vegetable plot. Samuel tells me it was a chilly night on the train. I'll get you boys hot tea to thaw you out, and then we'll have something to eat before we drive to my plot.'

Through lunch, the three men chatted without mentioning the purpose of John's visit. But when John excused himself for a trip to the toilet, Samuel and Isaak's discussion turned to more serious matters.

'Does he know about our operation?' Isaak enquired.

'No, but I'm sure he wants to join the guerrillas in Mozambique.'

'Are you sure he's not a spy or a government agent?'

'When, as a joke, I mentioned crossing over the border, he seemed interested. I told him I'd take him across, and we'd have fun avoiding the Rhodesian soldiers, but he's keeping his reason for coming to Umtali to himself.'

'When we get to the plot, he must tell us why he's here. And if he's not planning to join the guerrillas, we'll have to kill him. We can't risk him going back home and telling others about us.'

'Look out, here he comes. We'll talk later.'

The boys followed Isaak out of the shop and walked half a block to his parked car. It was an old, two-door white Ford Cortina. John jumped in the back seat with his backpack, and Samuel got into the front passenger seat. They drove through the town centre and suburbs, heading for the greenery of the hills. Soon, they entered fertile farming areas tended by African labourers. Although it was early spring, a hot sun shone down on the farmhands planting seed potatoes and preparing the fields for maize.

The end of the farming area signalled the end of the tarred road. The Cortina stirred up a cloud of dust as it passed over the dirt road, parched by the dry winter months. John found the drive soporific after his uncomfortable, chilly night on the train and dozed off. He wasn't sure how long he'd slept when he heard Isaak's voice. 'Soldiers!'

'Now remember, you boys are my nephews from two of my sisters. I'll do the talking.'

A tall African soldier held up his palm for them to stop. Two more African soldiers stood on either side of the car. The tall soldier walked up to the driver's side window, and Isaak wound it down.

'Where are you going?' the soldier asked. His stern manner and piercing eyes sent a chill through the car's occupants.

'I'm going home to my vegetable plot.'

'And who are these men with you?'

'They are my nephews.'

'They don't look alike.'

'No, they are my two sisters' sons. Different mothers and different fathers.'

'All of you. Get out of the car. Bring your bags. And open the boot.'

Isaak and the boys scrambled to exit the vehicle. The tall African addressed the other two soldiers. 'Search their bags.' He walked to the car's rear to inspect the contents of the boot. 'Open it.' Isaak hurried to comply. After finding nothing suspicious, the soldier walked up to John and Samuel. 'Why are you going to his plot? Is it so big that he needs help?'

'Yes, Sir,' said Samuel.

'Where are you two from?'

Before they could answer, a voice interrupted them. 'What's going on here, Sergeant?' It was a European officer who appeared to be in charge.

'We have three suspicious men, Sir. Two are of fighting age. The two young ones say they are going to help their uncle on his vegetable plot, but I don't believe them.'

The white officer walked up to the trio. 'Isaak, you old reprobate. What are you doing here, disturbing my men?'

'I tried to explain, Sir. I'm taking my nephews to help me with my plot. My rheumatism doesn't make it easy for me, so I need their help.'

The white officer studied the boys. 'I recognise this one, Isaak.'

'Yes, Sir. Samuel has helped me before. He's my older sister's son.'

'And this other one?'

'John is my younger sister's son.'

The white officer turned to the tall African. 'It's OK, Sergeant. I know this man and his nephew, Samuel. You can let them through.'

'Yes, Sir.'

As the trio drove off in the white Cortina, John glanced at the soldiers. The sergeant's withering look sent a shiver through him. He suspected the sergeant disbelieved their explanations.

As they progressed, the dirt road deteriorated, with more rocks and sun-hardened ruts, smoothed by the dust and winter winds. In the late afternoon, the Cortina turned into a neglected patch of land with a single large pole and dagha hut attached to a corrugated iron lean-to.

Isaak jumped out of the car. 'Come on, I'll make some tea.' He started a fire to boil the water and to grill a few mealies that he produced from a hessian sack. John gulped the tea to quench his thirst. He hadn't realised how parched his throat was until he took the first sip. He was also hungry and enjoyed the unappetising-looking mealies.

John looked around the hut, wondering where he'd sleep, as there appeared to be only one bed. Isaak would soon answer that question. 'John, I'll not beat around the bush. Samuel tells me you want to go across to Mozambique to join the guerrillas?'

'Well, I—'

'Yes, or no?'

'Well, OK, yes.'

'Right, Samuel will take you across tonight.'

'What! Right now?'

'There's no time to waste. The white officer knows me and thinks I am his friend, but that African sergeant worried me. I've not seen him before, and something tells me he will make trouble for us. You two better get going.'

Samuel was already wearing his backpack, waiting to leave. John slung his backpack over his shoulder and thanked Isaak for his hospitality. The two young men crossed the road and ascended the slope, leading to a gap in the prominent ridges above them. Samuel claimed it was the easiest path over the mountains into Mozambique.

The climb was arduous in the fading light, and when they reached a rocky outcrop about eight hundred metres from Isaak's hut, they stopped to catch their breath. Dusk was falling, and as they looked back towards the hut, they saw an army Land Rover pull up next to it. Four African soldiers carrying rifles jumped out and ran into the hut. One of them was the tall African sergeant from the roadblock. From their vantage point, John and Samuel could hear them shouting, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

'We should go back, Samuel. How can Isaak explain our absence?'

'No, we can't go back. We'll all be detained.'

'But what about Isaak?'

'It's his problem now. If anyone can talk their way out of it, he can.'

'Aren't you worried about your uncle?'

'Isaak's as much my uncle as he is yours. Some of us must sacrifice ourselves in the struggle.'

The soldiers dragged Isaak from the hut and threw him into the back seat of the Land Rover. The tall African sergeant pointed up the slope towards them, shouting something to his men. In the darkness, it was unlikely the soldiers spotted the boys in their dark clothing, but they clearly knew where they were heading. Three soldiers leapt across the ditch and raced up the slope.

‘Come on,’ Samuel shouted. ‘Let’s get out of here. Try to keep up with me.’

John was super-fit and kept up with Samuel, though the going was tough. They raced blindly up the slope, that felt steeper with each stride. There wasn’t time to check if the soldiers were gaining on them, though they could hear their shouts as they tried to stick together on the hunt.

The last four hundred metres to the top seemed endless, and the boys often slipped, grazing their shins on rocks hidden in the darkness. As they reached the top of the ridge, a rising full moon silhouetted them against the eastern horizon.

‘There they are!’ a soldier shouted.

The boys heard the crack of the rifles before the thump of the ricocheting bullets hitting the ground near their feet. The rifles crackled on, sounding like fireworks, urging them into headlong flight.