

## Chapter 33 – Salisbury or Bust

The glow on the eastern horizon woke John, though the high mountain ridges hid the sun, postponing its heat from warming his frozen bones. The thin blanket was all he carried for sleeping out in the open. It served the dual role of keeping him warm and clean from the dusty earth on which he'd spent the night. He couldn't afford to let his civilian clothes get grubby and identify him as an itinerant, sleeping rough.

John shook out the blanket in the stiff early morning breeze, taking care to stand upwind from the flying dust it created. He rolled it up into a tight bundle, making it small enough to squeeze into the straps under his backpack. His padded jacket was a godsend in the early morning chill. He pulled up the zip and turned up his collar before setting off. The winds buffeted him, reminding him to pull the jacket's hood over his baseball cap.

The farms he passed when he drove with Isaak and Samuel were a potential source of food. But first, he needed to get past the army roadblock with the aggressive African sergeant. Perhaps he'd moved on after two years, but no doubt an equally unpleasant replacement would wait there. Either way, he needed to avoid soldiers in this part of the country.

John walked through the bush, about one hundred metres from the road, so the vegetation would conceal him from any passing vehicle. He took care to avoid the isolated huts and other buildings he passed. When in the early afternoon he saw the army roadblock, he moved a further hundred metres from the road.

In the late afternoon, John stumbled upon two piccanins, who ran off when they saw him. Just a kilometre farther on, two women appeared and demanded to know his intentions.

'I'm going to Umtali. Why do you ask?'

'Men came this way only yesterday. Are you one of them?'

'No, I'm alone.'

'They were evil men, and they beat our village head.'

'Why aren't you in a protected camp?'

'We are, but during the day we can go out to tend our farms.'

'Well, I'm not one of them, and I don't want to meet them.'

'It is dangerous here to walk alone.'

'Thank you. I'll heed your warning and be careful.'

The women waved goodbye and disappeared into the thick bush. John worried they may report his presence to the army. No one could be trusted these days. They may have been innocent villagers, or they may have been informers. Both the army and the guerrillas relied on them. The evil men they spoke of may have been one of Kutuyisa's teams, perhaps even Simba and his men. Now he'd have to be wary about moving too fast, or he may bump into them.

Travelling long distances on foot was becoming a norm for John. As evening approached, he passed an abandoned hut and wondered if he should risk staying for the night. As he toyed with the idea, he became conscious of a dog barking in the middle distance. Curious, he walked toward the barking to investigate, as half an hour of daylight remained.

He didn't go too close in case the dog gave away his position to an unfriendly farmer with a gun. The barking didn't sound like a village dog, but more like one of the large dogs that

farmers kept for security. As he approached the barking, he realised he'd arrived at a property near the edge of the rich farming area that ran almost all the way to Umtali. From now on, he'd need to be on the lookout for farm dogs, farm workers, and security conscious farmers.

John noticed a row of banana trees ran along the fence in front of him, and to his delight, there hung bunches of bananas. Most bunches were green, but one bunch held a half dozen yellow bananas looking ripe for picking. Once one or two ripen, the rest of the bunch soon follow. He couldn't reach the bunch of bananas, but he could reach the flower, which he pulled down until he could pick the yellow bananas.

He was tired and hungry, so he returned to the abandoned hut and ate four of the six yellow bananas he picked. John thought he'd take a quick nap before moving on, but the next thing he knew, daylight through the hut's doorway flooded the floor. He'd slept well and longer than he'd planned.

The morning was freezing, and John shivered despite his padded jacket. Now, he needed to decide whether he should travel by day or night. He was loath to travel in darkness through an area he didn't know, but travelling in daylight was risky. Also, the idea of waiting all day for darkness wasn't appealing. He opted to travel with caution in daylight, but he'd also consider moving at night if it appeared possible.

John stepped out into the crisp morning air, and the early sun did little to warm him. He walked into the bush, moving further away from the road to circumvent the farm, but gangs of farmworkers complicated his plan. Frustrated that he'd wasted half the morning trying to get past the farm, he turned back towards the road.

The other side of the tarred road appeared less developed with patches of bush providing greater cover. John checked the surroundings to make sure no one was in sight. He hurried across the road, unaware of the deep ditch on the other side. After a few futile attempts to climb the bank, it occurred to him the ditch provided adequate cover from passersby and vehicles on the road. If he saw or heard a vehicle or someone coming, he could lie flat in the ditch until they passed.

As he progressed along the road, he alternated between the ditch and the patchy bush cover where the terrain allowed. At midday, he ate the remaining two bananas, so he'd need to keep a lookout for something else to eat.

In the late afternoon, a tall African leading a large brown dog passed him on the road. John lay flat in the ditch, but the dog barked and was most insistent. The African scolded the dog, 'Shut up Satan! Stop barking! It'll only be a rat or a mouse.' The man pulled on the lead, dragging the reluctant dog. John breathed a sigh of relief.

At dusk, John's stomach told him he needed something to eat. Dare he risk entering a farm? He had little choice, so when he noticed a farm with vegetable beds, he thought he'd have a closer look. He scanned the road, left and right, and seeing nothing, he hurried across.

Cabbage, spinach, and broccoli were the main vegetables. John loved eating those vegetables, but he'd no means of cooking them when he was trying to stay unnoticed. He tore off two large delicious looking mealies. He couldn't cook those either, but they'd do for later. Then he noticed a patch of small delicate looking leaves. Carrots! Yum! John pulled up a carrot. It wasn't too big, but big enough. He could eat those raw. He pulled up several more, taking care not to take too many from any one spot, making it obvious someone had raided the patch.

John collected a sizable bunch of carrots and rinsed them in the half forty-four-gallon drum under a tap at the end of one row. He kept the green tops, so as not to reveal any trace of his raid. As he was about to leave, he noticed a small avocado tree, heavy with fruit. This was more than he expected. He loved avocados and picked several ripe ones.

Two dogs barked in the distance, reminding him to get moving. He hurried over the road back to the ditch.

John made better progress using the ditch than he'd expected to make with his original plan to walk through the bush. But it was yet another night spent sleeping in a ditch, wrapped in his thin blanket. He shifted from his first position because the occasional car headlight lit up the surrounding ditch, suggesting he might be visible to an alert driver. His new position, a few metres farther on, remained in darkness from the vehicle headlights approaching in either direction.

At one point, a vehicle stopped close to his position, and John heard vehicle doors slamming. Loud voices pierced the night's silence. 'They reckon terrors from Mozambique are coming down this road to Umtali. Sympathisers in the African location replenish their supplies before they head west towards Buhera and Salisbury.'

'Yah, they must, now that the protected villages prevent them from getting food from the locals in the remote areas.'

'Yes, and they steal fruit and vegetables from these farms as they pass through.'

John lay still, listening to their conversation, willing them to leave. At last, the two men flicked their cigarette butts into the ditch. They got back into the vehicle, slammed the doors, and drove away. John looked over the ditch's edge to see an army Land Rover drive off in the direction he'd come.

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The beauty of sleeping outdoors is waking with the sparrows before sunrise. John ate four carrots and an avocado before dusting off his blanket and getting on his way. Soon, he reached the outer suburbs of Umtali. He was still a few kilometres from the city centre, but he'd blend into the early morning pedestrian traffic. Now, walking with urgency, he looked like any other African heading to their workplace.

Soon enough, John arrived at the railway station, but it was crawling with soldiers. Police checked everyone's papers before allowing them onto the platform. He hung around, wondering what to do. Then he thought of the convoys. Perhaps he could get a lift to Salisbury?

As he turned to leave the station, John almost bumped into a young African close to his own age. 'Sorry!'

'Ingwe, it's me, Samuel.'

'Samuel! What are you doing here?'

'Just checking on the station. But it's too dangerous for us to travel by train now.'

'How's Isaak? I found his hut deserted. It looked like he's not living there.'

'No, he's been in Chikurubi Prison since the soldiers took him. But where are you going?'

'Salisbury, but I saw the soldiers and police checking people on the platform, so I thought I'd try the convoy.'

'Today's convoy has left already. They leave at six o'clock.'

'I thought they left at eight.'

‘Not anymore. Have you got somewhere to stay? You can stay at my place until tomorrow morning. Then I’ll give you a lift to Grand Reef, where the convoy gathers every day.’

‘Grand Reef! Isn’t that an army camp? And once I got there, I’d need to hitch a ride with someone.’

‘An army camp is the last place they’d expect to find a terr. Are you game to try?’

‘What else can I do? How will you give me a lift to Grand Reef? Do you have a car?’

‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll get one. How were things in Mozambique?’

‘It’s a long story. Tell me, what do you do now?’

‘I work in the shop where you met Isaak.’

‘Aren’t you working today?’

‘No, I work part time.’

‘Why did you stop recruiting for the guerrillas?’

‘A lot of the volunteers held a romantic view of guerrilla life. They imagined themselves as Rhodesian Che Guevaras, but soon found out camp life was very different. Sometimes, camp commanders became obsessed with the idea some recruits might be sellouts. They tested them with severe beatings to assess their commitment to the struggle. Some volunteers died, and others ran away. If they were caught, they were killed.’

Samuel led John two and a half kilometres along End Avenue to the crowded Sakubva African location. The ageing African suburb was packed with concrete, shoebox-shaped houses that all looked the same. Down a narrow dirt alley, he stopped at a door. ‘Here we are. This is mine.’

John entered the dingy room with its tiny windows letting in a minimal amount of light. He blinked as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. The place was a mess. It didn’t look like Samuel made any effort to make his room comfortable. Blankets strewn across the floor suggested other people might have slept there. An old bicycle leant against the wall. The stale air reminded John of Isaak’s abandoned hut, and he did not relish the prospect of spending the night in the room.

‘You must stay here until we leave tomorrow morning,’ said Samuel. ‘The police often pick up young blacks hanging about the city. They’ll want to know what you’re doing and where you’re going. We can drink a couple of Chibukus, and I have sadza, and some meat we can cook on the fire outside.’

‘And I’ve got two mealies.’

After they’d eaten their evening meal at the end of the long, dreary day, they sat in the darkness talking about Gondo and John’s experiences at Camp David. But John didn’t mention Clarence or Simba. He wasn’t sure what Samuel knew about them or where his loyalties lay. Soon, they wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay on reed mats to get a little sleep. Tomorrow would be an early start.

John struggled to sleep. It was not because of the hard concrete floor. He was used to sleeping rough. A nagging feeling lingered in his mind. Samuel had been vague, even evasive in his replies to his questions. Why was he at the railway station? He said he was checking the station, but why? If he wasn’t involved with the guerrillas anymore, what was his interest? Why so many blankets in his room? Scattered on the floor, as if a sizable group had slept there recently.

Eventually, John fell asleep, dreaming about his time at Camp David, but something woke him. Was it a sound? Someone was moving about the room. He lay still, giving no sign he was awake. Then the door creaked, and the person stepped outside into the alleyway. Perhaps Samuel had gone to the toilet block at the end of the row of houses? John looked at the luminous hands of the Rolex watch he was issued at Camp David; half-past one. He shone his torch around the room to confirm he was alone.

When Samuel hadn't returned after twenty minutes, John discovered all of Samuel's clothes were missing. That suggested he'd not just gone to use the toilet. What was going on? John dressed himself and went to check the toilet block at the end of the alley. Samuel wasn't there. Might he have gone to get a car to give him a lift to Grand Reef? John doubted it. Earlier, he'd been concerned about Samuel's vague response when he asked about the car. He'd learnt to trust his instincts, and they told him something wasn't right.

Suspicious, he hurried back to Samuel's room and got his things together. About to leave, he remembered the old bicycle leaning against the wall. Well, why not! If he walked, he mightn't reach Grand Reef in time for the convoy. He wheeled the bicycle out into the alley.

Voices! It sounded like Samuel was returning with a group of men. And that other voice! Could it be Simba's? John wasn't sure, but he wasn't waiting to find out. He ran with the bicycle along a lane between the houses until he was two alleys down from Samuel's. Then he jumped on the bike and sped towards the main road that led back to the railway station.