

Chapter 35 – Hiding in Plain Sight

John was up early to go with Walter to his factory. Often, Walter would ride to work on his bicycle, with his cycle clips keeping his trouser legs from getting caught between the cog and chain. But today, Walter said they'd walk, as the factory was not far, and he wasn't confident of carrying him on the crossbar.

After breakfast, Martha saw them off before readying herself to visit her sewing ladies. Dozens of location residents filled the streets, walking or riding their bicycles, heading for work. John had not seen such a crowd going about their business. In The Avenues, the morning rush hour was sedate compared to this. He realised he knew little about the life urban Africans led. His world was his rural village and the privileged life he'd led in Judge Barclay's house. But for most Africans, life fell somewhere between those two extremes. Now, he'd experience that unfamiliar middle world.

As they approached the factory, they saw a crowd of Africans standing at a locked gate. 'They're hoping someone will come to the gate and offer one or two of them a labouring job. Every morning, a crowd of hopefuls gather there. Usually there's nothing, but occasionally someone gets lucky,' said Walter.

'What about the job I'm interviewing for?'

'It's a responsible job, and it's unlikely we'd find anyone suitable at the gate. That's why, when the boss heard you'd written your A-levels, he was keen to interview you.'

John's heart sank. Yes, he'd written his A-levels, but he'd never got his results, though he was sure he'd passed. His mother would have them, but he couldn't contact her while he remained a wanted guerilla. He didn't have any evidence he'd written his A-levels. What explanation could he give for not knowing his results or having his A-level certificate?

Walter led John down a passage to his office and instructed him to wait there while he let the boss know he'd arrived. While he waited, a young woman entered and sat down at a desk before introducing herself as Hazel, Walter's assistant. Moments later, Walter returned to announce the boss was ready to meet him.

John cleared his throat. His mouth was dry, which surprised him because he'd been in much more challenging circumstances than this. In junior school, high school, and even in Camp David, he'd felt confident and risen fast in the hierarchy. But here he felt unsure. Perhaps because he was not entering a structured, rank-based, disciplined environment, and for the first time, his physical prowess would mean nothing in the role.

He followed Walter out of his austere office, with wooden chairs and desks, along a simple passage to a carpeted staircase. It led to an elegant upper floor, with mood lighting above paintings hanging on the passage wall on one side, and tinted windows overlooking a leafy courtyard on the other.

They entered a large room with an enormous glass-top table surrounded by ten comfortable-looking chairs. A well dressed, middle-aged man sat at the table's head. Walter introduced him as Mr Jones, who invited them both to take a seat.

'Now, young man, Walter tells me you studied for your A-levels and are looking for a job.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Have you brought your A-levels certificate?'

‘No, Sir. My mother has it.’

‘Can you get it?’

‘I’ve been working on the vegetable farms near Umtali, and in my absence, my mother moved, and I’ve lost touch with her.’

‘In your absence?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘How long were you working at the vegetable farms?’

‘Two years, Sir.’

‘And before that?’

‘I was at school, Sir.’

‘Why did you waste two years working on vegetable farms after you wrote your A-level exams? Don’t you have any ambition for a career?’

‘Yes, I do, Sir, but I thought the experience would be valuable.’

‘I must say, your situation is rather unusual. Didn’t you keep in touch with your mother over those two years?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘All right! From the way you speak, I can tell you’re educated. Based on Walter’s recommendation, we’ll try you, so don’t let him down. As soon as you’ve found your mother, you must bring in a copy of your A-levels certificate for the personnel records. Walter looks after African wages, so you can give it to him. In the meantime, he’ll introduce you to Mr Botha, the store manager.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘Don’t thank me. Thank Walter.’

‘Yes, Sir, I do.’

‘All right. Walter will now take you to Mr Botha. As the assistant store manager, you’ll report directly to him.’

Walter and John walked down the carpeted staircase to the passageway and entered the factory. The smell of machine oil and the racket from the shuttles greeted them. Rows of looms swallowed cotton threads from fat beams, producing terry towelling fabric at the other end. The noisy automation mesmerised John. He’d not before seen anything like it.

At the end of the long room, they passed through a wide double doorway into a quieter area where racks stood loaded with prepared beams waiting for a vacant loom.

‘This is Mr Botha’s domain,’ said Walter. ‘He’s probably in his office.’

Walter led John through the beam store to another large room where cardboard cartons sat on pallet racking.

‘This is the finished goods store where we hold products ready for delivery to customers.’

In a glass-sided office in the store’s corner, John could see a figure in a brown dust coat standing behind a desk piled high with papers.

‘Mr Botha, Sir, I’ve brought your new assistant.’

‘What! Where did he come from, Walter?’

‘Mr Jones has hired him, Sir.’

‘Without consulting me?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘I hope he can read and write, and count?’

‘Yes, Sir, he’s a top candidate.’

‘All right! Come in, boy. What’s your name?’

‘John, Sir.’

‘You look too young for this job. What stores experience do you have?’

‘None, Sir.’

‘Isn’t that typical? Jones has landed me with another beginner that I must waste time training.’

‘John has his A-levels, Sir.’

‘It’s experience that counts. Not all that book learning. I didn’t need A-levels to get to my position.’

When Walter left, Mr Botha showed John to his desk, just outside his office doorway.

‘My department manages the cotton store, the beams store, the finished goods store next to the sewing room, the spare parts store, and the tools store. There’s also the dye store next to the dyeing room where they have the jigs and winches. It’s a lot to keep in your head, so you better pay attention. I don’t have the time to keep repeating everything for you.’

‘It’s OK, Sir. I’ll remember everything you tell me.’

‘We’ll see.’

Following a tour of the various stores, Mr Botha gave him a brief introduction to the stock records, which varied according to the stock.

‘You must get familiar with the stock records because our half-year stocktake is coming up soon, and you’ll be responsible for some areas of the stock count.’

The store manager pointed out several complications relating to the stores, and John got the sneaking suspicion the man was trying to frighten him into reconsidering the role. It was clear he was irritated Mr Jones bypassed him by hiring his assistant store manager. How could the managing director choose a suitable assistant for him?

Mr Botha was short and plump, with grey swept back hair and a brush moustache. He possessed sharp, beady eyes that reminded John of a hawk. He’d worked his way up in the company through years of loyal service. His belief in the adage, *if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it*, meant little had changed in the running of the stores department over the years. He resisted new ideas and scorned qualifications and youthful enthusiasm, but John was determined to show him he was equal to the task.

John’s first day at work passed quickly, and on their way home, he and Walter chatted.

‘Mr Botha’s not too bad,’ said Walter. ‘He likes people to think he’s a hard taskmaster, but that’s not what I hear from those who’ve worked with him.’

‘There have been several assistant store managers over the past four years, but none worked out. All but one were white, and if Mr Botha didn’t fire them, Mr Jones did.’

‘The African assistant store manager sold finished goods in the market. He’d stolen them from the company and adjusted the stock records to hide the fact. It was the altered stock records that caught him out. One white assistant store manager also stole finished goods and furnished his home with our best products. Mr. Botha found a further two unsatisfactory, and two others left because they disliked the job.’

‘He hired all those people, so his recruitment record isn’t good. Mr. Jones decided he would choose the assistant store manager this time. It might please Mr Botha if Mr Jones’s hire, that’s you, also failed.’

Martha waited at home, eager to hear about John's job interview. John, for his part, was keen to tell her all about it. She reminded him of his mum, and for a moment, he felt a pang of guilt. His mother and Judge Barclay were only a few kilometres away, but he couldn't risk contacting them and compromising the judge.

Each day, rumours circulated about Bishop Muzorewa's new government and the settlement talks with Britain. John followed the news, hoping that the situation would soon let him return home to his mother and the judge's household.

He missed Philemon's cooking, and the chats with Mortimer, Thomas, and Abigail. And of course, he missed his mother, and the intellectual stimulation over a glass of Scotch with the judge. He'd grown up with them all, and they were his family. And whenever he thought of Stanford, he got a lump in his throat.

He wondered about Tadiwa. How had she coped since Aneni's death? He at least found satisfaction in dealing out justice to Gondo and Takunda. What salve could soothe Tadiwa's agony?

At work, John used his imagination to propose improvements in the workings of the various stores. Mr Botha scoffed at his suggestions, calling them theoretical and typical of people with A-levels or degrees. But John noticed several of his ideas crept into the day-to-day operations.

After a few weeks, Mr Botha appeared less critical and began chatting with him over tea and lunch breaks. He quizzed him on his past and what he did after leaving school. John was cautious in his responses, not wanting to give anything away. Mr Botha teased him about his guarded responses and once suggested he may have been a terr. The man's lucky guess startled John, though he believed he'd not shown enough reaction to raise any suspicions.

Over the weeks, the working relationship between the two improved, and Mr Botha took John to the gate to help select suitable labourers for the stores. The first occasion was to select workers for the half-year stocktake, but thereafter, it became routine.

With Christmas only a month away, Mr Botha became more active, with his jaw set and his moustache bristling, as he flitted between the various stores and his planning boards. The tea-break and lunchtime chats evaporated as he tried to divide his attention between meeting customer orders and tidying and cleaning the stores before the annual holiday shutdown.

'John, please go to the gate and hire four labourers to work until Christmas. You've accompanied me enough times to see the type we need. You know! Big and strong ones.'

He'd always assisted Mr Botha in picking the labourers, but this time he would make the selections. The tingle in his tummy and his dry mouth surprised him because his other experiences far outweighed this simple task.

As he approached the gate, a familiar murmur arose from the hopeful crowd of Africans. He realised his nervousness was not because he might let down Mr Botha or the company by choosing unsuitable workers. But now, he could make four men happy this Christmas and disappoint many others.

The anxious eyes of about twenty men greeted him. A few raised their hands, while others called out to get his attention. John surveyed the small crowd, trying to find the most suitable for the job. He also tried to assess who most needed the work. The decision weighed on him.

Two men at the rear, standing apart from the others, distracted John. Something about the way they looked at him caught his attention. They exchanged glances with each other and

nodded in agreement. He wondered who they were. Might they have been at Camp David or Comrade Kutuyisa's camp when he was there? In his role at Camp David, most comrades would have seen him, though he didn't know many of them.

The two men drifted away, leaving him to select the lucky four to work in the storerooms' pre-Christmas rush. Throughout the day, John's thoughts returned to the two strangers. The odd way they reacted when they saw him concerned John. Were they comrades, or perhaps the police? Their sudden appearance shook him from the comfortable existence into which he'd drifted.