

Chapter 36 – A Change of Climate

John couldn't stop thinking about the odd behaviour of the two strangers at the factory gate. He presumed they looked for work but left upon seeing him. Getting to sleep at night proved difficult as he pondered what it meant. Each day, he waited, expecting something unpleasant to occur. But what?

Ten uneventful days passed, and John forgot about the incident. The Christmas period, together with the cleanup of the stores, kept him busy. For working over the weekend, Mr Botha gave him time off on the Monday. Martha stayed home on Monday, and John enjoyed the intellectual stimulus of her conversation, which was on a higher level than he found at work. Mr Botha only spoke about the stores or baited John, albeit in a good-natured way.

On Tuesday, back in the office, Mr Botha had news for John. 'Yesterday, two police officers came looking for you. I told them you'd taken the day off, so they said they'd come back. I suggested they bring their handcuffs next time.'

Mr Botha laughed at his little joke, but a chill ran down John's spine. The two strangers at the factory gate must have reported him to the police. What should he do? Where could he go? Could he talk his way out of the challenging questions they might have?

What would he say to Martha and Walter to excuse himself? He hated the thought he might embarrass the couple and bring shame to Walter at work. It would disappoint Mr Jones, and Mr Botha would feel vindicated for his recruitment failures. After considering his job and Martha and Walters' support and hospitality, he resolved to face up to the police when they returned.

The day passed without the police returning. Would they come knocking at Martha and Walters' door to arrest him? When he and Walter got home, Martha came out to meet them with the news the British Government was resuming control of the country. What did that mean for them?

Martha and Walter reasoned it should have a negligible impact on their lives. John was in two minds because the existing regime had served him well. How might things change? At work, John waited for the police to visit. One day passed, then two, then it became a week, and still nothing happened. Might they have lost interest in him, given the changes in the political climate?

The return to British rule signalled the end of hostilities, with the Lancaster House Conference set for ten days later. Now John's thoughts turned to visiting his mother and Judge Barclay. How could he explain his two-and-a-half-year absence and lack of contact? He would wait until after New Year before going home. In the meantime, he'd enjoy the Christmas break with Martha and Walter.

John thought it best to see his mother first before facing Judge Barclay. Talking to each alone would be easier, so he'd wait until the judge returned to work in late January before visiting the house. The judge would be busy at work, so he'd be able to talk to his mother alone.

He realised he procrastinated, making excuses to delay seeing his family, but he found the prospect daunting. He knew he would have disappointed them, and he felt guilty about that,

but he didn't regret what he'd done to avenge Aneni. His mission was not yet complete, but that was his secret.

A celebratory atmosphere pervaded the factory on the last day before the Christmas shutdown. Late morning, there were drinks and snacks for the administration staff. John restricted himself to a single beer and a few sandwiches before heading off home. The party was still warming up when he left, but he had an important mission to complete, Christmas presents for Walter and Martha.

The afternoon was hot and humid, but John found what he looked for, a tie for Walter, and a bottle of Je Reviens perfume for Martha. A Christmas break with nothing to do but relax and enjoy the company of his hosts.

Martha erected a Christmas tree in the lounge, and on Christmas Eve, they put their presents under it. When the men went to bed, Martha sprayed the tree with flocking powder, so when they woke on Christmas morning, it looked like it snowed overnight. The three enjoyed a Christmas dinner of roast chicken and vegetables, and drank a bottle of white wine Walter had bought.

But most memorable that Christmas was the Boxing Day car crash that killed Josiah Tongogara, the popular ZANLA commander-in-chief, only five days after the signing of the Lancaster House Agreement.

Soon, the holiday period ended, and John took advantage of the slow start to business in late January to arrange for a Monday off work. After breakfast, he said goodbye to Martha and set off on foot to see his mother, Norah. He'd taken extra care with his appearance, wearing his best clothes, but he couldn't do much about the unsettled tingling in his stomach. A Lyons Maid ice cream cart caught his attention, and he stopped to buy a strawberry flavoured ice lolly.

John's walk through the city's streets on a warm sunny morning proved energising as he strode out, humming a few of his favourite tunes. Salisbury looked sparkling just as he remembered it. This was the first time he'd walked into the city since his return to Salisbury.

The warring parties and the British Government signed the Lancaster House Agreement four days before Christmas, ending The Bush War. New elections were planned. The police who visited the factory, looking for him, never returned, and John felt free to emerge from his self-imposed exile.

The ZANLA guerrillas were moving into holding camps pending their disarmament. John had no intention of joining them, and this prospect remained his only area of concern. He never regarded himself as a genuine ZANLA guerrilla and wouldn't feel safe in that environment. What did the country's future hold?

With these thoughts occupying his mind, John didn't notice the long walk to The Avenues. Before he knew it, he stood in front of Judge Barclay's house. He was relieved to see the judge's Bentley wasn't there, so he'd only need to face his mother, Philemon, and Abigail. Thomas, the gardener, only worked in the afternoon. He took a deep breath and strode up the driveway.

A small fox terrier emerged from the bushes growing along the fence. It ran in small circles in front of him, barking, but not letting him get too close. This was unexpected. No one ever mentioned getting a dog.

As John approached the kitchen door, an unfamiliar African woman stood there.

‘What do you want?’ she demanded.

‘I’m John, Norah Ziyambi’s son.’

‘Who is she?’

‘Norah’s the housekeeper for Judge Barclay.’

‘Judge Barclay doesn’t live here.’

‘The judge owns this house. Is Philemon here?’

‘There’s no Philemon here. Colonel Evans is my boss.’

‘When did he move here?’

The woman shrugged.

‘Is Abigail here?’

‘No.’

‘Where is Colonel Evans?’

‘At work.’

‘When does he get home?’

‘Late.’

The aggressive, unhelpful woman stunned John. What should he do? As he left the property, he recalled Ruth Levi from next door. Perhaps she could tell him where to find his mother and Judge Barclay. He walked up the neighbours’ drive and knocked on the front door. Footsteps in the passage indicated someone was coming. The door opened a little, and a mature African Man peeped through the crack.

‘Does Ruth Levi still live here?’ John asked.

‘Yes, but she’s not here.’

‘When will she be back?’

‘Miss Ruth is on holiday. She didn’t say when she’d be back.’

‘What about Mr and Mrs Levi? Are they here?’

‘No, they are on holiday.’

‘Do you know when they’ll be back from their holiday?’

‘No. A long time, I think.’

‘Do you know what happened to Philemon, Mortimer, Thomas, or Abigail, who worked next door?’ John pointed to Judge Barclay’s house to make his question clear.

‘No. I’ve not been here long.’

John exhaled in frustration. How could he find his mother? No one seemed to know anything. Bewildered, he walked back towards the city centre, pondering his next move.

He walked down Jameson Street past the Pearl Assurance building on his left and the Monomotapa Hotel on his right. As he passed the Jameson Hotel, he heard a familiar laugh and noticed a man seeing off three others in a car. That laugh? No, it can’t be!

‘Parker, is that you?’

‘Ziyambi, I was hoping I’d bump into you. I expected you to get in touch once you’d settled into Oxford.’

‘Unfortunately, I never went.’

‘So, you couldn’t leave your girlfriend, hey? I remember you were crazy about her. Where is she? I’d like to meet her.’

‘It’s a long story. But tell me, how are you doing?’

‘Well, I got through my A-levels, thanks to your help. I got into Sandhurst and loved it. Now I’m a second lieutenant in the army. I came with the British troops that arrived just before Christmas to help oversee the transition period under British rule.’

‘And how about the others?’

‘All fine, I believe, except for poor old Fellowes. He died in a car crash in London a few weeks after we left school. So you both denied Oxford the benefit of your talents. My father still talks about you and says you should go through Sandhurst and join the British Army.’

‘I might have considered that at one time, but Aneni, my girlfriend, died during the Bush War, and things aren’t the same anymore.’

‘Hey, I’m sorry to hear that. You really loved her. What are you going to do?’

‘I’m not sure. Everything is a mess right now. Perhaps I’ll join the army here.’

‘But if you followed my father’s suggestion, you might get away from all this, including your sad memories.’

‘I’ll never get away from my sad memories. Besides, I have unfinished business here.’

The two friends parted ways after their beer garden drinks, vowing to reconnect soon. John walked back to Martha’s house, thinking about life’s unpredictable paths. He and Fellowes both suffered from fate’s fickle designs.

John looked forward to meeting up with Parker again, as he was his only current link to his former idyllic life. One evening, his phone rang. Parker wanted to meet again for drinks at the Jameson Hotel. He sounded enthused about a meeting he’d attended and someone he’d met. Parker claimed John might be interested in hearing about it.

The Jameson Hotel bar buzzed with patrons discussing what the future might hold for the country. For everyone, it was a step into the unknown. John watched the people come and go. Some were there after work. Others, judging from their attire, were setting out for the evening. Parker appeared at the entrance, scanning the room for his friend. John waved him over to a corner of the bar.

Parker ordered two Lion Lagers and got straight to the point.

‘The other day, you said you might join the new Zimbabwe Army. Last week, I attended a meeting where my colonel met with senior ZANLA and ZIPRA commanders. They discussed how they might incorporate the guerrillas into the new Zimbabwe National Army following elections and independence.’

‘Go on.’

‘After the meeting, we had drinks, and I got chatting to a senior ZANLA commander named David Chimbare. He was a nice guy and open about the lack of officer material in ZANLA, particularly at the junior officer level. I told him a friend of mine would make an excellent officer, and now he’s keen to meet you.’

‘But I don’t know if I want to join the Zimbabwe Army. Remember, I only said I might.’

‘Well, there’s no harm in meeting him. This could be a wonderful opportunity for you in Zimbabwe’s new order.’

‘Yes, I suppose you’re right.’

‘Are you free on Friday? He’s meeting me here for a drink at six o’clock and said to bring you along if you were interested.’

‘OK, but don’t build up his hopes because I’m not sure I’m interested. I’ve got a secure job as an assistant storeman in a textile factory. I can have a career there.’

‘C’mon, Ziyambi, I can’t see you spending your life behind a desk.’

Although he held reservations about meeting David Chimbare, John remained curious about what the man would say. A risk attached to the meeting because John deserted the ZANLA ranks following the ambush by the river, where he got separated from Simba’s team. He hadn’t tried to find his guerrilla colleagues, just the opposite.

He didn’t know what happened after the ambush. Did Simba’s men regroup? Were any killed? Perhaps Simba died in the ambush. John hoped that wasn’t the case. He wanted to kill Simba, and he wouldn’t make it easy, like a bullet in an ambush.

When John entered the Jameson Hotel bar on Friday evening, Parker was already there, waiting for him. They were fifteen minutes early and ordered beers while they waited.

‘Do you think he’ll turn up?’ said John.

‘Of course he will. This is a serious guy, a senior ZANLA commander. He’s no lightweight.’

‘No disrespect, Parker, but why would a senior ZANLA commander hang out with a junior officer in the British Army?’

‘I’ve already explained that. He’s looking for genuine talent for officer training, and he’s struggling to find it. Ah! Here he is now.’ Parker stood up to greet the new arrival.

‘David, I’d like you to meet—’

‘Ingwe, what are you doing here?’

‘Comrade David, how are you?’

‘I’m just David these days, Ingwe, not Comrade David. And I suspect you are no longer Ingwe?’

‘So you two know each other?’

‘Yes, Ingwe and I are old friends. I wondered what happened to him.’

‘Clarence sent me out with a team from Comrade Kutuyisa’s camp. The Rhodesians ambushed us at the same spot where Gondo and I were attacked. We scattered in the chaos, and I never saw the others again. I always wondered what happened after I left Camp David.’

‘As I understand it, the day after you left the camp, the Rhodesian forces attacked. I hadn’t yet returned from Chimoio, so I missed the attack. Many guerrillas died, and Clarence was missing. No one knows what happened to him.’

‘So now, you will join the integrated Zimbabwe National Army?’

‘Yes. I understand I’ll be a colonel in the new army. And you can soon be a second lieutenant like our friend Parker here. First, you must pass the selection board for officer training, but that will be a formality with your education and my recommendation. You would then go for twenty-eight days’ officer training at Chibondo Camp near Mazoe, after which they’d assess your performance and leadership potential. It would be no problem for you. Your career in the military would have begun.’

‘And when would you suggest I apply for officer training?’

‘As soon as possible. The sooner you’re commissioned, the better. You’ll be senior to all those of equal rank commissioned after you. Now, Parker, what happened to that drink you promised me?’