

Chapter 41 – The Gukurahundi

Winston Moyo sat smoking on the wooden crate that stood just outside his hut. It had been a beautiful January day, followed by one of those balmy evenings that characterised mid-summer in Southern Matabeleland. But now it was late, and a stiff breeze had blown up, pushing moisture-laden clouds in a scurry across the sky.

In summer, with daylight long gone, sitting in the open in such weather could prove chilly. Winston took another puff of his cigarette as he pulled the old grey blanket around his shoulders. The smell of the cigarette smoke somehow calmed his nerves. The rustle of the tree leaves and the long grass rose and fell as the wind gusts buffeted the surrounding bush.

But he heard none of that, with his thoughts miles away on his testing job in the engineering factory in Bulawayo. Life was a struggle since the accident when the steel rods fell on his foot. He knew he worked at only half the rate as before the accident, limping around the workshop, always several steps behind his workmates.

His boss didn't seem to worry about his reduced productivity, but that gave Winston little comfort. He'd always taken pride in being one of the best workers, and encouraged the others to follow his example. Now, as one of the slowest, it ate away at him. His colleagues always admired his energy and leadership, but now at meal breaks, he sat apart, morose, and reflective.

The Christmas break gave him plenty of time for thought, and he resolved to leave work and return to his village. Several years earlier, his father, Edward, made a similar decision when the coal dust got to his lungs, working underground at the Wankie Colliery. Now, back in the village, his hacking cough improved.

The prospect of relaxing in the shade of the enormous tree at the edge of the village, chatting with his father, while the women and children tended to the mealies and livestock, looked increasingly appealing as the Christmas break neared its end.

Winston took one last puff of his cigarette before grinding it into the dust and going indoors to join his wife on the sleeping mat they shared. Ahh, sleep, wonderful sleep! Bedtime, his favourite time of the day. When he slept, he dreamt of life before the accident. Though only forty years old, his waking hours made him feel much older now.

It was early morning, around five-thirty, Winston dreamt of scampering feet. Most likely, a poor creature running for its life to escape hungry predators. But then, a banging at the door. His dream dissolved, passing through wakefulness to alertness and alarm. Someone was desperate for attention.

Winston jumped up, and in two strides, reached his door. He yanked it open to find his ten-year-old nephew struggling to catch his breath, wide-eyed and terrified.

'Bundu, what's the matter?'

'The Gukurahundi are coming. They came to our village. We must run. They will be here soon.'

'Where's your father?'

'Dead, all dead. We must run. Quick!'

Winston raised his wife, Cebile, and his son, Charles. 'Hurry, we must hide. The Gukurahundi is coming.'

Next, he ran to wake his parents and the other villagers, totalling ten adults and fourteen children. Everybody knew of the Gukurahundi, the Fifth Brigade, with their red berets. Rumours of their atrocities spread through Matabeleland, and most of the villagers needed no prompting to gather their children and scatter into the bush.

Winston's parents and another elderly couple refused to leave. 'We're old. They will not bother us. You look after yourselves. We'll tell them you're all away.'

'They won't believe that. Anyone can tell more people live here.'

Nothing Winston said could change their minds. The stubborn older people were determined they'd be OK. Mindful of Cebile, Charles, and Bundu, Winston relented and raced with his wife, son, and nephew into the bush.

He shouted to everyone to move away from the village as far as possible. 'When you hear their truck, you must hide and not move, but get away far as possible, so your children's cries will not reach them.'

The villagers, who'd initially hidden nearby, got up and ran into the distance. Winston, with his family, raced along a gully and up a rise to a spot where, unseen, they could watch the village from a distance. They were over a kilometre away when the roar of a revving engine warned them of the Fifth Brigade's arrival.

They ducked down behind thick bush and rocks. Winston prayed the other villagers found secure hiding places.

The clank of the lorry's tailgate as it fell open preceded eight armed soldiers jumping out the back. A tall officer sitting next to the driver jumped down and took command of the raid. The driver remained alone in the lorry.

Soldiers ran into the huts and dragged out Winston's parents and the other elderly couple. From their vantage point, Winston listened to the shouting, but couldn't make out the words. When a soldier hit his father, he wanted to intervene, but Cebile restrained him.

'Winston, we need you now. You can't fight all those armed men alone.'

After loud ranting, the soldiers ushered the four elderly Africans into a hut and jammed two sturdy branches against the door. Then, without warning, a soldier threw a flaming tree branch onto the hut's thatched roof. Winston was aghast, with his injured foot exacerbating his helplessness. In the rush up to their vantage point, he'd not noticed his injured foot, but now the pain was excruciating.

'That's what they did to my mum, and the women and children,' Bundu cried. 'They burned them in the huts.'

Winston was in shock and struggled to speak. 'And your father?'

'They made the men dig a ditch. Then, they shot them and covered them with the earth.'

So, the rumours of the Fifth Brigade's atrocities were true. They'd murdered Winston's older brother and his family in their neighbouring village, five kilometres away.

Everyone stayed hidden until the lorry's tailgate and cab door slammed shut, and the roar of the engine faded into the distance. The cautious villagers emerged from the bush and stood staring at the smouldering hut.

'Why didn't they burn all the huts?' someone asked.

'Because they know we live here, and they'll be back for another attempt to catch us,' Winston ventured.

The villagers trembled at their near escape, and no words passed between them. When the ashes cooled, Winston and the other men retrieved the charred bodies and buried them in simple graves on the edge of the village, next to their ancestors. There wasn't time for ceremony, as everyone feared the Fifth Brigade would return.

That evening, the villagers debated what they should do following the Gukurahundi raid? When Bundu recounted what happened in his village, nobody questioned the need for an early warning system to alert them of another Fifth Brigade visit.

'The Gukurahundi came in the afternoon when I was collecting firewood in the bush. I hid nearby and watched as they raped the women and beat the villagers. They made them sing ZANU songs of praise before shooting the men and burning the huts with the women and children trapped inside. I hoped they would soon leave, but they camped in the village that night. When I overheard them planning to visit my uncle's village the following day, I ran here to warn him.'

Someone pointed out, the large rock at the edge of the village afforded a distant view of the dirt road that linked the villages in the area. Although it was several kilometres away, and at least three villages stood between that point and their village, they shouldn't assume the Gukurahundi were unaware of them.

'If we see an army truck pass, we must hide all evidence we're still here,' said Winston.

'How can we do that?' someone asked.

'If we cook after dark, the fires will cool and the smoke clear before dawn. And we must shield the cooking fires so they're not visible from the road. Remember, if we can see the trucks pass, they can see our village. When we run and hide, we must take any cooked food with us. If they find cooked food here, it would give us away. We must all think of what else we should do to hide our presence.'

'What if we miss the truck?'

'We must have a guard roster from dawn to dusk. They won't come at night.'

'How can you be sure of that?'

'I'm not sure, but I don't think they'll come at night. Tomorrow, someone must visit the other villages to find out what happened. If they are all destroyed, it will give us less time to react when we see the army truck, because we'll know they're coming straight here for us. It is fortunate the dirt road's poor condition will slow the truck's speed.'

After much excited chatter, the villagers nominated Bundu and two of the local boys to keep watch from the rock. Charles, Winston's seventeen-year-old son, was tasked with visiting the three villages that lay between them and the main road and reporting back about their condition.

The next day, not knowing if the Fifth Brigade camped somewhere close by, the villagers all moved with their prepared food and water to their hiding places. Until Charles reported back, giving the all-clear, they wouldn't risk staying in the village. The boys watching from the rock would also listen out for any vehicles. They'd head for cover at the first sign of an approaching truck.

The warm day, with a searing sun, forced the villagers to search for any shady spots near their hiding places. Most found only partial shade, with the sun forcing itself through the scrub vegetation.

A little past five-thirty, as the sun lost its bite, Charles walked into the village and signalled for everyone to return from their hiding places. The cautious villagers emerged from the bush, worried the Fifth Brigade might have caught Charles and forced him to take part in a trap. But it appeared he was alone.

The villagers gathered around him, eager to hear the news.

‘Bundu’s village is no more. It is deserted, with only burned huts remaining. In the next village, some people approached me from the bush. The Gukurahundi raped the women and killed the village head and his family. Also, they killed all the young men who were visiting for Christmas. The third village was the same. But the village head was away, so they killed his family.’

‘Were the red berets nearby?’ someone asked.

‘No, the Fifth Brigade has gone elsewhere. Those who survived the Gukurahundi’s visit said their leader is called Satan. If you look into his eyes, you can see your own death.’

‘Did they say anything else?’

‘Only that they’re planning to place guards for an early warning of any return visit. The villagers are terrified, as there is nothing to protect them. The Fifth Brigade soldiers enjoyed torturing and tormenting them.’

A stunned silence followed Charles’s report. Everyone realised their plan to keep guards on the big rock and to clear the village of all signs of habitation each day was essential.

Later, sitting on the big rock, looking across the moonlit valley, Winston and Charles chatted about the situation.

‘You did well today, my son.’

‘I was afraid to enter those villages. My uncle’s village was silent like the grave. I saw burned bodies in two huts, and I saw the disturbed ground where they buried the men.’

‘We must bury the women and children and rebury the men properly when it is possible.’

‘The people in the other villages ran from me when I arrived. They are afraid of everything now, and I was afraid of them. If the red berets return, they will tell them I am here. The Fifth Brigade will kill all Ndebele and Kalanga men of fighting age.’

‘How long will this terror last? If you survive the Gukurahundi, my son, and if your future wife bears you daughters, you must name your first daughter Mary, after the Holy Mother.’

‘Yes, father, I will.’

Winston’s accident, together with the dire circumstances that now faced him and his family, only strengthened his religious beliefs gained at the catholic mission in his youth.

‘Look, father, the headlights on the road. It’s a lorry, and it may come this way.’

The lorry passed the spot where they could see it from the rock. Thereafter, they couldn’t tell if it stopped along the road, or if it came on for them.

‘Quick, Charles, warn the villagers. I’ll get your mother and Bundu. We must hide.’