

## MY DIANA

On our first day in the army, they issued us our uniforms, webbing, brasses, and boots. The next morning would be the first barrack-room inspection, so we spent the afternoon shining brasses and smoothing and shining the boots. It amazed me how a little effort made the rough brasses and dimpled leather smooth and shine like polished glass. On the second day, the sergeant showed us how to strip, clean, and reassemble the rifles and Bren guns we would fire every morning on the rifle range.

The third day, my thoughts turned to my Diana. Years passed since my daydreams strayed in that direction. Now the feel and smell of her stuck in my mind.

I remember well the first time I saw her—a real beauty. One warm summer afternoon, I strolled along the pavement with my mind on autopilot and my eyes peering into the open shop doorways and window displays. It would be an understatement to say I stopped dead in my tracks, glued to the spot, drooling. After a moment's hesitation, I entered the shop for a closer look. It was love at first sight, and it took a conscious effort to drag myself away and continue my journey home.

After that afternoon, each time I walked past that shop, I'd go inside to see her. Several visits later, it became obvious to the shop assistants that I would buy nothing, and they gave me odd looks. Soon, I got the message, and from then on, I stood outside on the pavement and looked through the shop window, hoping nobody would notice me.

As a boy with strong passions, I couldn't live without her. Who do you turn to in such difficult times? Mum acted as any good mother would, assisting me in a crisis.

A few weeks later, when I got home from school one afternoon, a special treat awaited me. Mum arranged it, but how? Waiting there for me was my Diana. All my dreams had come true.

I couldn't keep my hands off her, running my fingers over those smooth, rich brown curves and butt. So smooth to the touch. Almost silky. I was in heaven. Thereafter, every day was the same story with her in my arms. The sensuous tactile experience seemed to improve with familiarity and every touch.

Over time, I outgrew my Diana and passed her on to a friend and forgot about her until my third day in the army.

They say you never forget your first, and that was true for me. In the army, I had a different one each day, with no opportunity to build a relationship like the intimate one I shared with my Diana. Many men had handled them, and they hadn't been treated well. They may have been functional, but rough, and not pretty compared to my Diana.

During my military service, I never found one that matched my Diana's beautiful, smooth, unblemished, abrasion resistant beech-wood stock. My second air rifle was a Falk; more powerful than my Diana, but like the rifles in the military armoury, aesthetics were not foremost in its design. Each shot vibrated with a loud metallic clang, as if something was working loose.

Willsgrove, surrounded by bush, was the ideal place for an air rifle. Peter, my cousin, possessed a BSA Cadet, which was bigger and more powerful than my Diana, but both air rifles worked well.

First, we needed to practise to develop our accuracy. The targets were tin cans on the wall surrounding the raised garden bed, and the family members took turns to shoot from the front veranda. To our surprise, my girl cousins were the best shots, but with practice, we improved. Patience was the key.

For a time, we menaced the area's birds, but soon, our aim was so good, they presented no challenge. Besides, seeing things from the bird's point of view turned me away from killing the harmless creatures. I was already on the path from guns to cameras, though I didn't realise it then.

Four years later, when my mother and I lived in an apartment in the city, a friend borrowed my Diana, and it was the last I saw of her. I felt bad when I later learnt Mum sold her leopard-skin coat to afford my Diana.

Handling a rifle was an important skill in Rhodesia, and I'm certain my Diana helped me gain my marksman badge at Llewellyn Barracks a decade later.