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ONE

Go ahead, shoot, I thought, because I was thirteen and desperate and anything, absolutely anything, was better than the fate to which my parents were leading me.

The policeman sat astride his growling motorbike, one hand on his holster, anonymous behind shades. He was one of the outriders for the new Prime Minister's motorcade, signalling for cars to get off the road. If drivers didn't stop quickly enough he was entitled to shoot. If they didn't move right off the tarmac, he could shoot. If they *did* stop but the policeman thought the passengers inside looked shifty or saw them messing around, he'd shoot. He was nothing like the policemen back home.

Home, I thought. An old ache swelled in my stomach. England. Britain. So far away. For me, this Africa was another world, and as we sat there watching the rider watch us, Britain felt further away than ever.

I sighed.

My father completely misinterpreted it and tutted as he showed me his watch against a sunburned wrist.

'We've plenty of time, I made sure you wouldn't be late on your first day,' he said.

And instantly the fear came charging back. It was here: the day I'd prayed would never come. Any hope that my father might have a change of heart and take us back to our own country flickered and finally died.

The policeman didn't move. With sweat glistening on his

black-brown skin he just glared at my mother and father and me as we sat rigidly in silence. It was getting hotter and hotter now the air wasn't rushing through the open windows. Beyond the car, insects clicked and buzzed in the dry grass. We were miles from anywhere. Anywhere but here.

A moment later the motorcade rushed by at a million miles an hour, the cars all secretive and dark. I didn't know which one was the Prime Minister's because you couldn't see behind the tinted glass, though I guessed it was the biggest and sleekest Mercedes in the middle with the flags.

'You see that?' My father spoke with the look of a child gazing through a toy shop window. 'There goes a great, great man. He's given the people freedom – what could be a greater achievement than that?'

He caught my confused look in the rear-view mirror.

'Didn't you read the book I gave you?'

I nodded, lying, but he knew perfectly well I hated history.

'For generations, Europeans have treated Africa like a playground. We've carved it up amongst ourselves, stolen its riches and not given a damn about the poor people who live here.'

My mother sighed but my father was in full swing now.

'Britain claimed *this* land and called it Rhodesia, but the black Africans have fought back at last and tipped the balance of power, son. White minority rule is over, thank goodness. Rhodesia no longer exists. This is Zimbabwe. And, now that the fighting has finally finished, that man there's going to do tremendous things for this country, you mark my words. He's a hero.'

I nodded subserviently while inside I was chewing over his words: *tipped the balance of power*. It seemed a strange expression to me because it gave me an image of a seesaw, and when one end was up the other was always down. It was never actually balanced.

The tail of the motorcade whooshed by, followed by yet more policemen on motorbikes, sirens wailing. Our man joined them and left us in a cloud of red dust that filled the car and made a mess of everything.

'Yes indeed, a hero. Do you know something, darling?' My father spoke to my mother. 'If I could meet him, just to be in the same room as him, I would consider it the greatest moment of my life.'

And he made a silly laughing sound as if it were something that might actually happen.

He never did meet Mr Mugabe. For me, it was to be a very different story.

TWO

We pulled off the main road and between huge stone pillars that bore Haven School's name. Up a willow-lined drive, then down and round to where the boarding houses were. A jostle of vehicles had already filled the small car park, a reassuring reminder of life beyond the grounds. The baking January sun glinted off windscreens.

My father stopped the engine and sat a moment without speaking, looking up at Selous House – my house – like it was a monument or something.

'Named after Frederick Courteney Selous, one of Rhodesia's founding figures,' he said at last, as if we hadn't stopped talking about it. 'All five boarding houses in the school are named after Rhodesian founders. Giving names of important people to buildings and places is just one way the white government asserted power.'

He gave me a meaningful nod.

'But that's in the past now. Colonialism is an outdated ideal that was never going to work. It doesn't matter who you are, you can't simply plant a flag and claim rights over someone else's land. This is Africa, for Africans. And black people had every right to rise up and use aggression.'

Even though most of the other parents and boys around us were white I started to feel even more nervous about being here, and I wondered if he knew how he was making me feel. I opened my mouth to speak.

'So was that what the war was about?' I asked. 'Land?'

'*This* is what it was about,' he replied, finding and pointing to a black family standing isolated on the grass. The boy was small and looking at his shoes while his parents tried to appear relaxed. 'The winds of change. Opportunity for all. Boys like him wouldn't have been allowed in a school like this before independence. But you can't suppress people because of the colour of their skin. Or at all, for that matter. Do you think it was right?'

'No,' I said.

'It was utterly, utterly wrong.' I wasn't sure my father had heard me. 'White people should be ashamed.'

He climbed out and walked enthusiastically towards the family. Soon, the three grown-ups laughed, and I noticed some of the white parents glancing and shaking their heads.

My mother sat silently in the front fanning her face. She'd cried almost the whole way here.

'It won't be so bad,' she said, a line she'd fed me on and off all through Christmas – I'd felt safe then, despite the weirdness of unwrapping presents in the heat, as though the start of the school year might never find me. But it had. 'You'll make lots of new friends, you won't have time to be sad.'

We sat and watched my father. Two tall senior boys greeted him politely as they passed. My father puffed himself up and stroked his beard, and responded in the voice he saved for the telephone. He looked strange today, wrapped in one of his London suits as if he was on business. All the other fathers were in short-sleeved shirts, shorts, desert boots and long socks. Their wives wore floral-print dresses like ones I'd seen on old British TV programmes.

'You mustn't blame your father,' my mother spoke again. 'He has a very different sort of background, his parents never had money. He feels very strongly that you should take the opportunities he never had.'

She dabbed her nostrils with a tissue.

'The Embassy has been very kind in offering to pay the fees. We could certainly never afford a school like this on your father's salary.'

'He could get another job.' I spoke petulantly into my tie knot. 'In England. He acts like a stupid history teacher most of the time, he could be one of those.'

'Now, now. Don't be rude,' my mother told me, but with her face pointing the other way.

She blew her nose.

'This country is our home for the time being,' she went on dutifully. I could tell she was forcing her mouth into a smile. 'It'll be better this time. I believe that, I really do. Back at home your father's old department just didn't appreciate his . . . *skills*, but I think he'll finally find his feet with this new job. He's running a whole office. Things will be different.'

'But I don't really know anything about this country,' I said, a plea as I eyed the small boy over on the grass who now appeared to be looking right back at me. 'What if they don't like me?'

She turned round again.

'Then we *will* go back, one way or another. I promise. It's where we belong. We can go and live with Granny while we settle back. She says we're always welcome. She misses us so much since we left.'

Now her smile was real.

'But you have to promise you'll at least try. If you can do that then I'll see what I can do. Your father does listen to me sometimes, he does care. Maybe he can put in for a transfer – I'm sure the Civil Service does that sort of thing all the time. Deal?'

I nodded quickly up and down, knowing I could believe her optimism, and my mother leaned into the back to give me a hug. Beyond, my father waved me out with impatience.

'You're at grown-up school now, Robert, you don't want the other boys seeing that,' he said as I went to him. Until that point I'd always been Bobby. It seemed Bobby had been left at home and I wished I was there with him.

I lowered my head and pulled on my the oversized blue blazer that itched my skin.

'We've found you a new friend,' my father went on, pointing to the small black boy. 'He's starting today too. This is Nelson. Nelson, this is Robert. You two are going to be best friends.'

Nelson's father smiled and agreed. Nelson himself didn't move until his father gave him a nudge, and he nodded a silent hello. His eyes cried out that he was in fact having the same kind of day as me, and we laughed anxiously together. It wasn't a sound we would make many times that first term.

'Nelson can give you a hand with your trunk, if you ask nicely,' my father added.

My head went down again and he folded his arms. His shirt had dark blots all over it and was tight across his stomach.

'Come on, stop that. You're thirteen years of age,' I was told as if it were news.

Nelson and his parents were watching me, and I looked away.

'Time to take your trunk in, Robert. Up you go.'

'Can Mum come?'

'Your mother isn't feeling well in this heat.'

'But can't she come up, please? Can't she come and see me before you . . .'

Go, was the word that wouldn't form.

My father stood solid, then eventually uncrossed his arms.

'I'll see what I can do.' He took his wallet and extracted two ten dollar notes, thought about it, then put one of them back. 'Here. And don't go spending it all on sweets in the first week.'

* * *

When I was little my father always insisted on covering any scrape, large or small, with a lock-tight plaster because he said the countries we lived in were filthy dirty and infection spread quickly in hot weather. I hated it because I knew when the time came to take it off again he was going to make me cry.

It was always the same: 'OK, Bobby, I want you to count to five. One, two . . .'

Not once did I ever get to five. Apparently it was for the best.

That's what it felt like the whole of that day: counting to five, waiting for the pain.

The dorm was big and open-plan with about twenty beds – ten beds on each side of a chest-high wall. The floor was an ocean of grooved tiles the colour of dried blood, and the walls were painted a stark white. Louvred glass filled the room with light. You could see right over the lower playing fields and across the bush but it felt like looking out of a cage because all the windows still had grenade screens on them from the war.

We carried our trunks up one after the other. When we were done I sat on my bed and it pushed against me, a mere pancake of foam over a thin board on legs. Everyone had their own wooden locker next to them, and sheets and blankets had been folded and put on the top.

'You reckon we have to make them ourselves?' I asked.

'Guess,' said Nelson. 'Do you know anyone here?'

I shook my head.

'Me neither,' he said. 'I wish I did. Someone to look out for me, like an older brother. It wouldn't be nearly so bad with an older brother. We're from Town. And you?'

I told him.

'Close to Town but just outside. It's really boring there sometimes. My dad doesn't like cities because of all the people.

But we're British really, from England,' I added before I could stop myself. The words were suddenly guilty on my tongue, abrasive. They never had been before. 'Does that mean you hate me?'

Nelson frowned. 'Why should I hate you?'

'Because I'm British. And . . . you know . . . the war.'

'The war wasn't against Britain.'

'Oh.'

'I obviously didn't fight in the war, but even if I had been old enough and you'd been too, I still wouldn't hate you.'

'Oh?' It was my turn to be confused. 'Why not?'

'Because surely wars are about putting an end to a wrong, not making a new one?'

'I guess so.'

'Most black people don't hate white people, and most whites don't hate blacks.'

'So what *was* the war about, then?'

He fidgeted slightly.

'Some of the white people that first came loved Africa and everything in it, just not the Africans. They didn't understand us, so they treated us differently . . . badly . . . and that wasn't fair. That's what my dad says.'

'I didn't realize,' I said.

Nelson shrugged. 'It's all over now, that's the main thing. Hey, at least your folks live close, it won't be difficult for them to visit.'

'My dad says it'll be worse for me if they come.'

'*Ja*, mine too. Looks like it's just us then. Maybe we should look out for each other, hey?'

'Like brothers?'

'*Ja*,' he said. 'Like brothers.'

'Yeah,' I said, pleased. 'You're on.'

We shook hands to cement the deal.

I flipped the catches on my trunk. Khaki shorts and shirts for classes, black trousers and white shirts for evenings and Sunday chapel, socks, shoes, sports whites, pyjamas . . . Matilda, our maid, had ironed, folded and packed my stuff immaculately. Postcards from my grandmother lay safely on top in a protective envelope.

The dorm was filling up. A boy came panting in towards us with flushed cheeks because he was carrying his trunk on his own. He dropped it too early and it clattered to the floor. The name on the lid said *Jeremy Simpson-Prior*.

'You want a hand with that?' I offered, but he shook his head and wiped snot.

Boys were looking over from the other side of the partition. One of them kept staring at me – or maybe at Nelson, I couldn't tell – and eventually he came round and tapped my shoulder.

'There's a spare bed next to mine,' he said.

His eyes were a sharp, intense green. I glanced away to Nelson, who I think was only pretending not to listen as he started to unpack.

'I'm OK here,' I said.

'Are you serious? Next to stinking chocolate-face here?'

Simpson-Prior barked out a laugh. If it was a joke I didn't get it.

'Take the bed.'

'Really, I'm fine where I am,' I replied, feeling a whole new sensation of nervousness.

To my relief, the boy shrugged. 'Your choice,' he said, but then gave Nelson a push against the wall.

I had to do something. Nelson was doing his best not to look at anybody, as if he wanted everyone to go away, but we'd just made a promise.

'Hey! Leave him alone,' I said, not quite knowing what would happen.

The boy with the green eyes blazed at me, and I thought maybe he'd hit me. Instead, he simply pointed at my face.

'Don't say I didn't give you a chance.'

'I'll come,' Simpson-Prior stood eagerly. 'I'll sleep over on your side.'

The boy didn't even pause to think about it and turned Simpson-Prior's trunk right over, spilling everything.

'Why would I want a poof like you next to me? Your breath stinks.'

That was my first encounter with Ivan Hascott. It wasn't going to be my last. Not by a long shot.

We continued unpacking our stuff. I checked my watch and glanced at the door but couldn't hear my father coming, and as the minutes went by I realized he wasn't coming back at all, that this time he hadn't even let me start counting before ripping off this particular plaster.

Nelson kept himself busy, taking his time over everything.

'Are you OK?' I asked him.

He nodded. '*Ja*. Fine. Thanks for helping.'

'Any time. See? We're like brothers already.'

And if someone had told me then how badly I would actually come to let him down – and in the way I did it – I would never, ever have believed them.