

Southern Rhodesia, 1959

Makuti learned to swim almost as soon as he learned to walk. He didn't know that he wasn't born to enter the water; he just followed his mother in and did what she did.

The rain had been falling all his short life. Makuti couldn't know it – how could he – but it was not supposed to be like this. It was not meant to pour down so heavily from the skies, at this time of the year. It was not natural.

His first steps were in the mud and he tried as best he could, on his short legs, to keep pace with his mother who was terribly stressed. She walked in circles and Makuti's path was made harder because he had to lift his little feet in and out of the ever-deepening footprints his mother was pounding into the sticky slime.

When she stopped abruptly, Makuti skidded and bumped into her legs. He fell over and, instead of scrambling to his feet, enjoyed the peace of lying there for a moment, wallowing in the cloying mud. When he tried to stand, he slipped and rolled some more, and found that he enjoyed it.

His mother turned and looked down at him. She snorted and stamped her foot. He dragged himself upright again – the brief moment of play over.

Makuti was hungry. Although he was already walking, it would be some time before he was weaned – such was their way – so he sought out the solace and nourishment of his mother's teat. She brushed him aside and, hurt, he stumbled and sloshed after her. The rain started again and spattered his back. He was tired, hungry and cold.

His mother shook her head. She was starving too. The ring of their forlorn footsteps grew shorter each day, as the rain continued to fall and the river continued to rise. In the days before she had given birth, Makuti's mother had exhausted herself climbing higher and higher up a hill, which had now become an island. Although they were safe from the rising waters up here on this rocky outcrop, there was nothing to eat and the new mother was half-crazed with hunger.

Thunder rolled down the valley and lightning ignited the night sky. Makuti's mother walked to the floodwaters' edge and waded in. And Makuti, not knowing any better, plunged in joyfully behind her and started to swim.

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'Bejane!'

Paul Bryant raised a hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the morning sunshine on the still waters. The lake was the same molten silver as the hazy sky and it was virtually impossible to discern the horizon. Paul pulled the battered pair of binoculars from their worn leather case to see what fourteen-year-old Winston Ngwenya was pointing at.

'Well spotted, Winston. It's a rhino all right.'

'There are two.'

Paul moved the focusing wheel and saw the youngster was correct again. Bobbing behind the first horned head was a little dark blob. 'A calf.'

‘Ah, but the mother will be trouble, *baas*.’

‘Dad, let me see.’

‘Steady, George!’ Paul lurched as his son inadvertently shifted the outboard engine’s tiller in his haste to catch sight of the swimming black rhinoceroses, but regained his balance. He smiled to show George he hadn’t meant to chastise him, just to warn him.

George set the throttle to neutral and the wooden dinghy slowed. Long-limbed and angular, with his father’s height and his mother’s blonde hair, George had the awkwardness of adolescence and the promise of manhood competing for control of his every move and word. Paul smiled as he handed his son the binoculars.

Winston, kneeling at the bow, reached out a hand to steady his friend, but George brushed it away. ‘I’m fine.’

It was amazing what a difference a year could make, Paul thought. Winston’s body was filling out quickly and he was almost a man. His voice was breaking and his movements around the boat were self-assured and confident. Bryant thought of the African boy as a second son, almost. He was the firstborn child of his good friend Kenneth, who taught in the black township of Mzilikazi, on the outskirts of Bulawayo, back home in Matabeleland.

Kenneth and his wife, Patricia, had two more children after Winston, a girl and a boy, Thandi and Emmerson. All three of their children were healthy and strong, which was something to give thanks for.

‘I see them, Dad,’ George said. ‘Too bad Mom can’t be here.’

Paul nodded. He, too, wished she were here with him, instead of back on the farm, way out near the Bechuanaland border.

‘Go, Paul. For God’s sake, please go – you’re driving me bloody mad,’ she’d urged him. They’d tried for a second child after George had been born, back in 1946 after Paul had come back from the war, but Pip had miscarried. Then, thirteen years later, at the age of thirty-nine, she had told him the news that she was expecting what the Afrikaner farmers living in Rhodesia called a *laat lammetjie*.

This, however, was no late lamb. It was a tiny human life that Philippa was carrying. Paul had been adamant that Pip should stop work around the dairy and spend more time indoors resting. They'd had fights over it, but she'd stood up to him, telling him that she would not live her life in fear – not even of another miscarriage. He'd seen in her the same fierce independence and stubbornness she'd shown as a volunteer policewoman during the war, when they'd first met.

When the call had gone out from the Rhodesian Game Department in the early days of Pip's pregnancy for volunteers to help with a massive operation aimed at saving wildlife stranded by the rising waters of the newly created Lake Kariba, they had gone as a family to camp near the growing but still primitive township that had sprung up near the dam construction site.

The three of them had known bugger all about how to save wild animals from drowning when they'd arrived five months earlier, but since then they had learned how to corral and drive impala, kudu and waterbuck into the lake, then shepherd them towards the mainland. They had plucked deadly mambas and irate cobras from waterlogged trees and rescued a host of smaller creatures then transported them by boat to the new banks of the swelling Zambezi River.

One thing Paul had learned from his time working as a volunteer on Operation Noah, as the rescue operation had been dubbed, was that every animal could swim. The problem was that some could not swim as far as others. The rescuers' hearts had soon hardened to the sight of the bloated bodies of dead buck that hadn't made it, or half-eaten remains of animals that had literally fought each other to death.

Earlier in her pregnancy, Pip had come out most days on the boat for an hour or two at least, and proved herself as able and fearless as any of them. Paul was sick with worry about the baby sometimes, but Pip was happy to pull on his old wartime pilot's goggles and a pair of motorcycle gauntlets and pull a mamba from a tree, or sit in the boat cradling a soaking, shivering baby baboon whose mother had drowned.

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Paul had lived in Southern Rhodesia since the end of the war. He'd had few family or prospects to encourage him to return to his native Australia and he'd fallen in love with Pip in 1943, when he'd been based at Khumalo airfield, near Bulawayo, as the adjutant of an aircrew training base. When he'd returned to Africa after being demobbed in 1945, he'd realised he'd also fallen for the continent.

There was a wildness of spirit in Africa that had once existed in Australia but was fast disappearing. Out here, in the wilds of Rhodesia, things were very different. Life was harder in Africa, and it had to be lived on the edge. As such, people seemed to enjoy things more, and live for the day.

Paul had taken Pip back to Bulawayo and the family dairy farm after their first month with Operation Noah, at the same time that George was due to return to school. But as the next school holidays approached, George pleaded with his parents to be allowed to return to Kariba to help out again with the relocation of animals. Paul did not want to go without Pip, but she all but ordered him to take their son back to the growing lake. Paul had been reluctant to leave her alone and heavily pregnant, but if he'd learned one thing in the past sixteen years it was that his diminutive Rhodesian wife was not to be disagreed with. He'd left with George and Winston, promising to be back in plenty of time for the birth, which was still not due for another month.

'Look, Mr Bryant, she is going the wrong way,' Winston said.

Paul saw he was right. 'Head for that island, to the left, George. We've got to try and drive her towards the mainland.'

George nodded, his face set with concentration. The quickest way to the rhino would be to come close around a trio of dying trees that marked what had once been the top of a hill. As they closed on the trees Paul joined Winston at the front of the boat, and both peered ahead looking for submerged trunks that might ground them or tear the bottom out of the boat, which had been designed for water-skiing and fishing rather than rescuing animals.

‘Stick!’ Winston called, pointing off to starboard. George swung the tiller and the boat glided past the dangerous obstacle.

Paul scanned the nearest tree. ‘There’s a cobra up there. Make for it, George.’

As George turned again and cut the throttle, allowing the boat to coast up to the top branches of the drowning tree, all three of them looked down at the bottom of the boat to protect their eyes from the potentially blinding venom. Paul took off his Australian Army slouch hat, a souvenir of his war days, and put on his old flying goggles. He reached for a steel pole whose end had been fashioned into a u-shaped hook. Winston cried out and wiped his bare shoulder as a jet of venom lashed his skin.

‘Come left,’ Paul said. He placed a hand on Winston’s neck to stop the boy from looking up, and ducked sideways as the cobra reared in the branch and spat another jet of milky venom towards him. Droplets splattered the goggles’ right lens and burned his cheek. Paul reached for the snake. It pulled back and then struck, lightning fast, at the pole, but Paul was able to trap its head against the water-logged trunk of the tree. ‘Pass me the bag, Winston.’

His head still bowed, Winston raised the hessian bag to Paul then took hold of a nearby branch to secure the boat, while Paul grabbed the pinned snake behind the back of its head and thrust the writhing, hissing reptile into the sack.

‘Can we go for the rhino now, Dad?’

Winston looked up and laughed at George’s deadpan remark.

‘Head for the rhinos, George, fast as you can,’ Paul said.

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Philippa Bryant exhaled and leaned against the hot metal of the Chevrolet *bakkie* as the young African man loaded her paper bags full of groceries into the rear of the vehicle.

‘Thank you, Sixpence,’ she said, and handed him a few coins.

‘Are you all right, madam?’ he asked.

‘Fine, thank you.’ She forced a smile and he walked back into

Haddon and Sly. She was actually far from fine. She felt hot, fat, tired and thoroughly sick of being pregnant. She and Paul had been ecstatic about having another baby – at the start – but now she found herself moodily alternating between being annoyed and terrified. It had been many years since her last miscarriage, yet being pregnant again had reopened her old wounds and poured salt into them. At the same time she was full of nervous hope for the baby that kicked inside her.

She regretted ordering Paul to take George to Kariba for the school holidays. She wanted to be there with them, or, if she couldn't have that, she wanted them both back at the farm. Now.

Pip opened the door of the car. 'Bloody hell.' She realised she'd forgotten the bread. She was terribly forgetful these days, and remembered it as a symptom of her first pregnancy. 'I'm too old to be pregnant,' she said out loud as she walked slowly back into the department store. She felt like crying when she found the bakery had just sold its last loaf. Dejected, she turned and headed back out into the street. There was a bakery a block down Fife Street.

The sight of purple jacaranda blossoms cheered her a little. She knew from her time as a volunteer policewoman that this city of Bulawayo sometimes lived up to its Ndebele name, as a place of slaughter. She'd been involved in a couple of murder investigations and several cases of rapes, stabbings and beatings. She herself had been a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her first husband, before she'd met Paul. Fortunately, Charlie had died during the war. Fortunately for him, that is, because she'd decided after a couple of years as a volunteer constable that she would have had him arrested on his return from duty overseas, war hero or not. She knew that the orderly grid of wide, clean-swept streets and the impressive, stately public buildings of Bulawayo were, in some cases, just a façade of order. Pip had seen the grubbier side of the city – the blood, vomit and sewage in the streets of the black townships, and the seamy private lives of the outwardly upstanding members of the white community.

Pip only came to town once every month or so, to shop for what she couldn't grow or make herself. It was a chore at the best of times, but on her own and carrying another person in her belly it really was no fun at all.

'Howzit, Pip?'

She looked up and saw Fred Phipps touching the brim of his hat. Fred farmed in the same district as she and Paul, and they ran into each other at parties once or twice a year. The Bryants and the Quilter-Phippses weren't close friends, but they got on fine. Fred had played in the same rugby team as her first husband, Charlie, and Pip often sensed that he disapproved of her marrying Paul. Word had gotten around town during the war that she and Paul had become an item virtually as soon as she had heard of Charlie's death. Pip didn't care, and she had told anyone who bothered to listen that Charlie had been a bastard, despite receiving a posthumous Military Medal for his actions in the desert in North Africa.

'Fine, Fred, and you?'

'Fine, fine. You must be due soon, hey?'

Pip nodded, and her head felt heavy. She was sick of being asked the same question. 'A month.'

'Sharon's due any day. I'm just busy in town getting some things for when I have to fend for myself on the farm.'

Pip smiled and felt a genuine warmth for the man. She'd heard, ages ago, but had since forgotten, that his wife was pregnant. 'Please give her my best, Fred.'

'I will.' He paused and cocked his head. 'What's that noise?'

Pip heard shouts, and more rhythmic noise, like singing, coming from around the corner. She started walking in the direction of the sound, and Fred, who had been walking in the other direction, turned to follow her. Pip reached the closest corner and saw a group of about forty African men and women holding placards. One read, *Down with unfair bus fares.*

'Bloody *munts*,' Fred said.

Pip turned and looked at him. 'What's all this about?'

‘Probably tied up with the bus fare protests in Salisbury. A friend of mine in the police told me they’ve had to crack a few kaffir skulls up there because the *munts* are complaining about some increases in the UTC bus fares. I mean, why should we whites be subsidising their bloody travel? If a bus company needs to charge more to make ends meet, then who are they to object?’

Pip frowned. Very few African people owned a bicycle, let alone a motor car and for most of them the bus was the only affordable way to travel. Now that Fred mentioned the Salisbury trouble she did remember reading somewhere that the fare hike meant some Africans were paying up to twenty per cent of their meagre wages on bus tickets.

‘Come on, Pip,’ Fred said, putting a hand on her arm. ‘We’d best get you away from this mob.’

She shrugged off his touch, then turned and gave him a smile to show him she meant him no offence. All the same, Paul was the only man she wanted touching her. And she could look after herself. ‘I’m fine, Fred. I’m only going to the bakery.’

Fred looked past her, at the crowd. The group was well dressed – the men in suits and the women in neatly pressed skirts and blouses. A few were singing, and two of the men were walking up and down the street handing out pamphlets of some sort. Most of the pedestrian traffic was white people and they uniformly ignored the Africans and their handouts. A white man stopped to berate the group and tell them to go back to the bloody trees they’d climbed out of.

One of the men handing out flyers had his back to Pip, but he looked very familiar. When he turned around she saw it was Kenneth Ngwenya. Pip ignored Fred’s panicked warning cry from behind her, looked both ways, and walked across the street towards the protesters.

‘Kenneth!’

The tall Ndebele schoolteacher turned and smiled. He closed the gap between them. ‘Hello, Pip, how are you?’

'I'm fine, and you?' He nodded and told her he was well. 'Is this what you do in your school holidays, organise civil disobedience?'

He chuckled. 'It's a peaceful demonstration. The bus companies are holding people to ransom. There have been big demonstrations in Salisbury and I, as an interested community member, wanted to show my support for the people opposed to these increases. We're calling on all African people to boycott the bus services until the companies drop their prices again.'

Pip knew that Kenneth was much more than an interested community member. He was a member of the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress, the dissident pro-black-independence organisation headed by Joshua Nkomo. As a native-born Rhodesian, and the descendant of one of the members of Cecil John Rhodes's Pioneer Column, part of Pip bridled at anyone – African or white – wanting to destabilise the Rhodesian political scene. Rhodesian Africans, in her opinion, were better educated and better treated than any other blacks on the continent. There was agitation for majority rule in countries to their north and Pip, like most other whites, feared what might happen if Britain were to make a blanket decision to give independence too soon to people who were not prepared or educated enough to rule a country themselves. She liked Kenneth, although she found his wife, Patricia, surly to the point of being objectionable. Pip got the feeling that the woman disliked all white people. Kenneth, however, was like Paul – he took people as he found them. Paul often had Kenneth over to the farm for tea or went fishing with him after church on Sundays.

Pip wanted to ask Kenneth more about the demonstration, but their conversation was interrupted by the clanging of a police car's bell. They looked down the street and saw two patrol cars speeding towards them. The cars skidded to a halt and four officers got out of each vehicle, drawing truncheons as they strode towards the protesters.

'Break it up. This is an illegal gathering and you are hereby ordered to disperse,' called Chief Inspector Harold Hayes from the head of

the group. Pip cringed. She hadn't seen the bull-necked policeman for years. Hayes had been a sergeant during the war and Pip had been partnered with him for a while. He was an inept, racist bully, and proof that many people in uniform were promoted far above their capabilities simply because they hung around long enough. 'You, move away from that woman!'

Hayes was pointing his truncheon towards Kenneth, but Pip could see the overweight police officer hadn't recognised her yet. 'Chief Inspector . . .'

As Pip started to walk around Kenneth, he put out his arm, as if to tell her not to involve herself. At the same moment two of Hayes's young British South Africa Police constables bolted ahead of their commander, obviously ready to break up the gathering by force if they were given the slightest encouragement.

The protesters had stopped their singing and chanting and looked at each other for guidance. Some stood defiantly facing the oncoming police, but two younger men and a woman started to flee. One of the men, perhaps a student, was looking back over his shoulder at the advancing constable as he ran, and as Pip moved out of Kenneth's protective reach, the man collided with her and she fell over backwards, hitting the ground hard.

'No!' Kenneth yelled.

'He's kicking her, sir!' one of the junior constables cried out as the young man's legs became entangled in Pip's and he dropped to one knee beside her. The policemen raised their batons and charged.