

I am wondering which is worse: the highway to Pretoria, or flying to Lusaka on *Zambian Airways*. Tough call. I need to get to Lusaka as quickly as possible and the first available flight is on *Zambian Airways*.

The reason they can take a last-minute booking becomes apparent the moment I get on the plane. The steward says brightly, 'Sit anywhere. Except in the toilets.'

I am travelling with one of my partners, Thabo Molewa, who has done some work on the case, but on this occasion is consulting the ANC on another issue.

Thabo is not a good flyer and I can see that the steward's request not to take his seat in the toilets has rattled him. Me too, for that matter.

My meeting with the ANC has been arranged through Penuell Maduna, deputy head of the organisation's legal department in Lusaka. I am taking whisky and chocolates. These are always appreciated by those on low stipends.

On my left Thabo grips the armrests and looks decidedly unhappy. I wonder if I should crack open the whisky now. Then at least if the plane goes into a terminal tailspin, the descent will pass in a golden haze of Johnnie Walker. Initially the flight is bumpy but smoothes out, and I fall asleep. I am jolted awake by the plane smacking into something hard and Thabo's screams next to me, as he lunges forward in his seat, madly clawing the air. We are all screaming now as the overhead lockers open and hand baggage and duty-free purchases rain down. Outside, I see lights flashing past as the ice-cool voice of the captain tells us that we have landed and are most welcome in Zambia. No warning about beginning our descent, putting our seats in the upright position and extinguishing cigarettes, just straight in. But I don't care. I'm grateful to be alive.

Penuell Maduna meets us at the airport. A large and friendly man with bull shoulders and a barrel chest, he fires off a dozen questions on the drive into the city. What is the latest on the state of emergency? How many people are in detention? Is the money coming through for the trials? When was I last on Robben Island? Who had I seen? Did we know anything about a police death squad operating outside Pretoria? Why was soccer such a shambles? What was the weather like in Joburg? Was the attorneys admission exam difficult? How much did a Castle beer cost?

I notice he doesn't stop at red traffic lights. This worries me.

'Bandits,' he explains. 'Please keep your doors locked, there have been a number of incidents in Lusaka and nice cars like these attract attention.'

After our experience on the plane, I am alarmed that we cruise through the red traffic lights like a presidential cavalcade, but the coward in me confirms that it is probably preferable to risk instant death by colliding with another vehicle than to be hijacked by an AK-47 wielding armed gang. My fearful thoughts are interrupted by Maduna.

'By the way, we have arranged for you to see someone about the trial. I'm not sure who it is but it has been arranged. We are very keen to get news of Masina and the others. There is a lot to discuss.'

We check into the Pamodzi Hotel, the best and most expensive hotel in Lusaka, but clearly a tired establishment. The grand entrance with the sweeping drive seems out of kilter with the run-down exterior and the unkempt gardens. Inside is tatty and dated but busy. The room rates are ridiculously high given their bland utilitarianism, the stained bath and cigarette burns in the threadbare carpet.

Maduna leaves us in the lobby saying that we will be called after breakfast with the details of our meetings.

Thabo and I have a drink at the bar overlooking the patio. The whisky, warm in the soft heat of the African evening, the sweating darkness outside and the lit foliage on the patio rustled by the lazy turning fans give the drinkers an aura of seedy glamour. Here in this lush city of gutted roads, wide neglected avenues and decaying buildings, the ANC has been allowed to make its headquarters in exile. A grand gesture of generosity and solidarity from the Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda and one which has cost his country dearly as the unforgiving South African government does its best to strangle Zambia's economy.

The next morning I am in my room working after a good breakfast when Penuell calls to say he is in the lobby. We take the elevator to a room on the third floor. I still do not know who I am meeting. Penuell knocks and we enter to be greeted warmly by Chris Hani and another man who does not give his name. I haven't met Hani before. Here is the Nationalist government's public enemy number one. The Chief of Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe and a senior figure in the South African Communist Party. He is responsible for a number of MK attacks. He has been demonised as an assassin. My first impression is of a mild-mannered and softly spoken man who seems more interested in listening than talking. Penuell orders up some tea and coffee, and leaves us alone.

Hani is dressed in khaki trousers and a flowing white open-necked shirt, African style. A tall, balding, well-built man with long arms, he relaxes into the far corner of the couch. His face is composed and relaxed, not smiling but open and almost friendly. The other man perches on the table near the door, almost behind me. Clearly the room has been hired for this meeting. The curtains remain closed.

Hani asks if this is my first time in Lusaka. I reply that I have been here a few times and get down to business. I outline the situation. He nods, says nothing.

I take out copies of the charge sheet and give them to him. He reads. I wait for him to finish, then talk him through the likely sentences on each charge. I outline the options for legal defence. It takes some time and we order more refreshments. He doesn't have many questions.

When I'm finished he leans forward, sips his coffee and says, 'I am glad that they are still alive. At one stage after they went silent and there was no communication, we thought they had been killed. We saw nothing in the press and so we thought that they had been captured and executed. It was a great relief when we received word that they were alive and being brought to trial. It is a big thing for the police to have captured a squad of this calibre.'

'They also thought that they would be killed,' I say. 'After their capture they underwent interrogation and torture for a long time. I think the State wanted to show the public that they had caught an ANC assassination unit and they also wanted to get the credit and exposure for having caught them. Also, if they did not bring them to trial and simply killed them, the public would think that the killers of those policemen had got away. Their capture was too much of a coup for them to just disappear.'

'There was a fifth member of the squad who was not arrested, Justice Mbizana. Did they mention what happened to him?' Hani asks.

'Yes,' I say, 'Ting Ting drove him to the Botswana border and he climbed through the fence. They think he is still in Botswana.'

'No.' Hani shakes his head. 'He went back in and we have heard nothing from him. We are worried about him.'

I promise to make some enquiries.

'How are their spirits?' Hani asks, changing the subject. 'Do they know what they are facing?'

'Their morale is good,' I say, 'and they are very calm. Each time I see them they seem strong. And yes, we have worked through their legal options in great detail.'

'Tell me how they were captured,' he says.

I reply that they do not know who informed on them. It may have been a woman they knew but they're unsure. Hopefully it will emerge during the trial, although often the State will keep the identity of the informant a closely guarded secret. The circumstances of the arrest suggest that they were betrayed. I go into the details of their arrest.

Hani nods slowly and says, 'And that is what Jabu told you?'

‘Yes, it seems to me that their capture was more than just good luck or good policing. From the number of cars involved and the high level of the security police who were present on the scene at the time, it strikes me that this was a lot more than coincidence.’

I do not want to go too deeply into this aspect as it is beyond my scope, so I tell him of my visit to Govan Mbeki. He is interested and asks after the health of the old man. Our conversation drifts. We are not getting to the point. I look at my watch and Hani notices.

Suddenly businesslike, he says, ‘It is important for these men to act in a manner which is consistent with their own principles and those of the ANC. At the same time, when cadres depart from the principles of the ANC, we need to have understanding. These men have done an enormous amount. They have already suffered and they will suffer more. While I may not agree with a particular type of defence taken by our people at a trial and may even feel a sense of betrayal when they deny loyalty and allegiance, we in the movement have to understand what it is like to be a prisoner when you are alone and totally in their power. If we have humanity, we must understand the prisoner’s situation. In this case, these comrades are like my family because the ANC is our family here in exile. We have left our blood families at home. Within this family in exile, these men reported directly to me and I ensured that they had proper training, amongst the best that we have to offer. They have done what we have asked and so, in my view, we should not and will not ask anything more of them.’

Hani pauses.

‘So, and this must be emphasised, this is their choice. And if they have made this choice, which I personally believe to be a correct one, we are behind them. I happen to agree with them, and it also seems to be your assessment, that there is every chance they will get the death sentence, even though we know that miracles happen. But the experience of the ANC is that the water does not turn to wine in South African courts. I understand that they cannot deny that they have committed these acts, and not just because of their confessions, which you say you can challenge anyway, but because they are soldiers of MK and those were their orders. However, I am worried at their stance on not participating and challenging the jurisdiction of the court. Politically, it is correct but it is playing for high stakes to make that statement and test that

proposition in a case of this nature, where the death sentence is likely. To take that position in a case where the potential sentence is five or ten years or even life is one thing, but to do it in a death sentence case is Russian roulette.'

High stakes indeed. There are none higher from a personal point of view.

I reply. 'You are right, there is a strong chance they will get the death sentence anyway. The State has a strong case and so there is an element of "If I am going to go anyway, then let it be in the manner of my own choosing". At the same time, they feel that they were driven by history to do what they have done and they want to give that exposure. They don't believe they are criminals and they refuse to be tried as criminals, and while this is not a conventional way to handle a trial, these are not conventional times.'

'You know,' Hani says, speaking with the softness of a man who knows that he does not have to raise his voice to be heard, 'these are special men, that is why I chose them for this mission. These men are not killers, they are not criminals, and in a different time they would be normal citizens. It is the country that has criminalised them, it is not their fault. So please tell them that we respect their choice and that we will support them every way we can.'

'Okay,' I say, facing the abyss, thinking that now the accused will never move from their position. I am already wondering how the case will be handled and how the judge will react. Probably he'll be furious that his jurisdiction is being rejected and his court used as a political stage.

'Tell them that we will be following the case closely and that they have done more than we asked of them.'

Rising, we shake hands and Hani wishes me luck. The door is opened by the man who has remained silent throughout the meeting. I return to my room. I have taken no notes during the meeting, believing that it might upset Hani and also wanting no documentation that the security police at the airport could confiscate.

I have often wondered to what extent a person's status, in terms of their power or wealth, influences our perception of them. If we stripped away the trappings and met them afresh, would we regard them as we had when we knew their status? While we are all susceptible to the influence of high office, it is always sickening to watch normally rational

people become sycophants before powerful politicians or the very rich. This degrades both parties. With Hani, I realise that the power comes from the man and not the office.

That night, Thabo and I eat at the hotel restaurant. He has concluded his consultations and we have agreed to meet Penuell Maduna later. Thabo is one of the busiest people I know, and over the past few months we have had little opportunity to chat. He tells me about his family and the excitement of the new house he has bought recently in Spruitview to the east of Johannesburg. It is a new suburb with decent-sized houses and proper amenities that has attracted a lot of black professionals. It is a suburb, not a township. Thabo talks about how his political involvement began when he became president of the student council at the University of Turfloop and he wonders if he might not have ended up in MK if he had left the country as did so many of his fellow students. He tells me about his father who went into exile a long time ago and from whom he has not heard in years.

The red wine relaxes us as he talks about always having wanted to be a lawyer. This is the reason he stayed in the country. We joke about his straightened and oiled hair which is seriously in fashion among black male professionals in Johannesburg, and how he would have battled to maintain that in the camps in Angola. Not to mention his perfect suits. Thabo is far and away the slickest dresser in the office. His charm, combined with his great skill as a conciliator, has led to his being a popular choice as a mediator in many major disputes. A tenacious lawyer, Thabo has represented detainees and run trials in places far away from the comforts of the profession in Johannesburg.

A large, portly man approaches the table and Thabo jumps up and hugs him. He introduces Mzwai Piliso. I recall that he is the head of the Security Department of the ANC. A man from the older generation. Thabo suggests that we have drinks in his room. On the way up, we change the venue to my room. It turns out that Mzwai Piliso is a good friend of Thabo's father and this is the first time in a long while that Thabo has had news of his father.

I pull out the Johnnie Walker Black and pour generous tots. Piliso refuses the whisky and takes a soft drink. Soon we are joined by Penuell and Ronnie Kasrils, the Chief of ANC Military Intelligence. Penuell continues the line of questions started in the car, and the conversation becomes

animated as we give updates on other trials, on what is happening in the Eastern Cape, on the effects of sanctions and the sports boycott. We are all sports fans. Politics and more politics, laughter, jokes and commiserations. By two in the morning others have joined us and the room is a haze of smoke and alcohol as we order room service. The whisky that Thabo and I brought is gone. Ronnie starts to reminisce about his home town and soon the talk is of the smells of home, the smog over Joburg in winter with the orange sun burning the dusk. We talk of music, cooking meat on an open fire, watching sport on a Saturday afternoon, driving through the Karoo, the noise of downtown, the lions roaring at night in the zoo in Johannesburg.

I am struck that there is no maudlin self-pity from the exiles. Instead, they are convinced that victory is inevitable. They are optimistic. I am silent.

At about three-thirty, people leave. There are hugs and greetings to pass on, each one saying how lucky we are to be going back. For them there is no going back in sight.

A bizarre event happens at the airport the next day. It's a Friday. Thabo and I check in, go through customs and settle at the bar in the departure lounge. There are a number of other passengers enjoying a pre-departure drink. On the tarmac is a single plane, our flight.

With about thirty minutes to go before our boarding time, I look out and see the boarding stairs have been moved away from the plane. Not registering this, I idly watch as the ground staff push the stairs to one side. I take another sip of my beer. I see the door of the plane shut and then the man next to me says, 'Do you think that is our plane leaving?' There is silence as everyone in the bar becomes alert. The plane moves slowly forward, and the bar erupts as everyone grabs bags and runs madly along the long tunnel to the tarmac. We make it outside in time to see the plane gather speed and take off. There is stunned disbelief. Our luggage is on the plane and at this time on a Friday afternoon, Lusaka is not the place any of us want to be.

A man says, 'Fantastic! Every other airline gets delayed, only Zambian Airways is different, we leave thirty minutes early!'

Thabo and I get back to Joburg late that night, after catching connecting flights back via Swaziland.