

CHAPTER 2

‘Which hotel, sir?’ the taxi driver asks as he closes the trunk of his gleaming yellow Datsun. The latch catches on the third try.

‘King George the Sixth,’ I reply.

‘The King George, sir,’ he answers as if he hasn’t heard correctly.

I sit in the back with the Hermes on my lap. Although a plastic piece is missing from the window crank, the silver handle shines like a place setting at a Christmas dinner. The driver picks up a piece of towelling and wipes it across the dashboard, chasing away imaginary dust. The steering wheel on the right has me disoriented. I look out the window for murals of heroic guerrilla fighters or billboards with Mugabe’s face. The yellowing facade of Harare International Airport bears no odes to the Chimurenga, as the Zimbabweans call their 13-year liberation war.

The driver pulls a lever and the meter ticks like an angry metronome.

‘Your car smells new,’ I tell him.

‘We are trying our level best, sir,’ he answers. ‘These days things are so tough.’

‘Why?’

‘We don’t know if the Europeans will keep coming,’ he responds. As we pull out of the parking lot, he puts on black-framed sunglasses. A strip of masking tape holds one of the sidepieces together.

‘Is this your first time in Zimbabwe, sir?’ he asks.

‘My first time outside the United States.’

‘You are from America, sir?’

‘Yes, Wisconsin. A very cold place in the Midwest.’

‘I think at school we once learned that they produce cheese in Wisconsin, sir.’

‘That’s right. Wisconsin is famous for cheese and the Green Bay Packers.’

Despite his politeness, I’m starting to worry about the driver. I don’t see many people or houses. I’ve asked no one about taxis or crime. I am at his mercy in this land of reconciliation.

‘Sir, what’s a Packer?’ he asks.

‘It’s a football team,’ I reply. ‘It’s a little hard to explain.’ A stadium full of freezing people with their faces painted yellow and green *is* hard to explain.

A station wagon passes us on the left. The back wheels kick up gravel as the vehicle leaves the tarred surface. A dozen people press against each other inside. A baby strapped to its mother's back peers out the window.

'These ET's,' the driver says, 'they are causing all the accidents these days. Always overtaking on the left. Where do they buy their driving licences?'

'What's an ET?' I ask.

'An emergency taxi, sir. Those Peugeot 404s that keep running people off the road. They're so dangerous.' He speaks softly and the accent is new to me. Taxi drivers don't have the elocution of prime ministers.

After passing many fields of thriving weeds, there are pedestrians and houses. Black people are walking everywhere – on dirt paths, along the side of the road, in front of shops. Most of the women wear black canvas tennis shoes or flip flops. Though I'm sweating from the January heat, many of the walkers wear knitted beanies. A white woman who looks like she's in a hurry passes us in a blue Morris Minor. A German Shepherd barks from out her back window.

Farther along, two men ride black, balloon-tyre bicycles, like the one I got for my eighth birthday. Ahead of them, a man pushes a similar bike with a table and four wooden chairs tied to a rack over the back wheel. Smoke from a loosely rolled cigarette drifts from his mouth as he escorts his load.

'Sir, this is where the Europeans live,' the driver tells me. 'It's called Hatfield.'

'The houses are huge,' I reply. High walls and concrete fences surround the yards, leaving only the red roof-tiles easily visible.

'Not so big, sir. In Borrowdale or Chisipite they are far much bigger. Some are double storey.'

'Doesn't this city have smog?' I ask. Harare's blue sky evokes camping in northern Minnesota and not the overhang of a capital.

'Iwe!' the driver shouts as a car speeds across the road in front of him. The offender ran a stop sign. 'Hauzive kudraiva! You don't know how to drive, you!' The driver parks in front of the hotel and the meter stops. He hands me a scrap of brown paper.

'Here are my details, sir,' he says. 'Whenever you need a taxi, ask for Cosmas.'

The black metal letters on the building in front of me read 'King George v Hotel'. One generation, apparently, has fallen away.

Before I can get my arms into the straps of the backpack, a tall man in a white Nehru jacket is standing in front of me. 'Good morning, sir,' he says, trying to ease the backpack out of my grip. 'Let me help you.' He smells like freshly laundered hospital linen.

I carry my typewriter as I follow him up some stairs and through a double wooden door. The lobby has well-vacuumed, ageing brown carpeting and dark veneer panelling. The brass light fixtures are missing most of their bulbs.

'Good morning, sir,' says a tall blonde woman at the desk. 'Do you have a booking?'

Mugabe's picture hangs on the wall behind her. They've washed away his wrinkles. He's wearing those dark-framed glasses from the days of the liberation war. He's not smiling, but I like having him there.

I unzip seven pockets in my backpack before I find the well-folded piece of paper that confirms my booking and hand it to her.

'Aaron,' she says in a voice now half an octave higher, 'take the gentleman's bags to Room 124.'

'Yes, madam,' he replies, picking up the luggage he has just set down. I follow the slow-treading Aaron down a corridor of more brown carpet to my room.

The mattress sags and the nightstand drawer smells of mothballs. I'm coated with lack-of-sleep slime and ready for my first shower on the African continent. Instead, I collapse on the bed. I fidget to find a comfortable position. After a few minutes the springs relax and I'm asleep in Zimbabwe, exactly where I want to be.

CHAPTER 3

The King George lies on a busy road, opposite a small set of shops. As I come out the double doors, three young men wait for me at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Chess set, master?’ says one of them. ‘Very good price for you, my friend.’

‘Nice hippo, baas. Cheap, cheap.’

They’re hawking stone carvings, animals, knights, rooks and bishops. I keep moving. They follow with marketing ploys and titles of honour. I want to tell them I’m no one’s master, that there are no slaves in a free Zimbabwe. I keep quiet and they turn to other prey.

I can see tall buildings a couple of miles away. After two blocks, a blue Mazda pulls up next to me. The driver, a middle-aged white man, rolls down his window.

‘Do you want a lift?’ he asks. I haven’t seen mutton-chop sideburns like his since Joe Cocker at Woodstock.

‘No, thanks. I’m just taking a walk.’

‘What part of America do you come from?’ he asks.

‘Wisconsin.’

‘I have a brother in South Carolina,’ he tells me. ‘He loves it there.’

‘I’ve never been to South Carolina,’ I reply.

‘How long will you be in Salisbury?’

‘About a week.’

‘I’m heading down south as soon as possible. There is still some sense in South Africa. We’ve lost everything to the communists here.’

‘Thanks for stopping,’ I reply.

I start walking. ‘I need to stretch my legs,’ I tell him. ‘Those long flights can knock you out.’

‘Go well,’ he says. ‘Or I guess I should say “have a nice day”.’ He chuckles as he rolls up his window and drives away.

Before I reach the city centre, two more white drivers pull over to offer rides. The last one gives me a warning: ‘Europeans from overseas don’t realise it’s not safe for us here any more.’

He hangs his head out the window of his pickup and looks both ways. ‘These munts will smile at you and say “yes baas”. Then, the next thing you know ...’ He drags a forefinger across his throat and bares his teeth.

Sirens sound in the distance. The driver perks up like a startled squirrel and slams his car into first gear. 'I must get out of here before the nonsense starts,' he tells me. 'I might get stuck here all day. Bloody fools.'

He speeds away.

Half a block ahead, a white-enamelled motorcycle glides to a halt in the middle of the intersection. A man in a sharply pressed green uniform and white helmet gets off the bike. His siren screams as he raises his hand to stop cross traffic.

By the time I reach the corner, four or five cars are backed up on each side of the street. A few of the drivers stand alongside their vehicles, chatting and smoking cigarettes. Dozens of pedestrians gather and look toward the oncoming noise. In the nearby high rises, a collection of black women in servants' uniforms hangs over various balcony railings. As the sirens peak, a half-ton pickup shoots past. Soldiers in camouflage fill the bed, AK-47s at the ready. One shoulders a bazooka. Behind the pickup come four black Mercedes-Benzes.

As the third Mercedes passes, two women next to me point and say, 'Varimo. Varimo.' I snap my head toward the car just in time to catch those dark-framed glasses. The Prime Minister is reading the newspaper in the back seat.

Behind the four Benzes comes a blue-and-white police car, then a second truckload of soldiers even bigger than the first. Another white-enamelled motorcycle trails at the rear of the procession. The driver steps up the volume on his siren as he passes.

I stagger off toward the city centre, feeling like a groupie after an all-night concert. Three hours in Harare and I've already seen my hero. I keep forgetting that traffic travels on the opposite side of the road. I look the wrong way when crossing streets, barely avoiding collisions with the dented Datsuns, rusting Renaults and other ancient four-cylinder vehicles that dominate the roads. A Pontiac in Harare would look like a battleship in a yacht harbour.

The cars aren't the only things out of date. Modern department stores haven't reached Harare either. I walk slowly past a tobacconist minded by an old white man, a blue ascot riding high on his neck. A rack of pipes and tobacco canisters frames his grey hair. A cuckoo clock on his wall advertises Barclay cigarettes.

The sweet fragrance wafting from the shop reminds me of my grandfather's living room. As a small boy, I loved to watch him tamp the shred-

ded leaves in his long-stemmed cherrywood pipe. The room filled with wonderful spices when he took that first puff. I've never understood why my father smoked Camels instead. But then there are many things I've never understood about my father.

A few doors from the tobacconist lies a sidewalk café attached to a Wimpy hamburger bar. A curious glance reveals white women drinking tea and cutting toasted cheese sandwiches into bite-size pieces before delicately forking them into their mouths. Black waiters scurry about carrying red plastic trays. They respond to the curt orders of their customers as if the liberation war never happened.

Some of the men on the street are wearing platform shoes and there are more mutton-chops. White women's hair is sprayed into lacquered mounds reminiscent of 1960s singer Lesley Gore. The main thoroughfare is First Street Mall, a vast walkway of freshly laid bricks.

I go into Barbours, one of the city's most exclusive shops. Nearly all of the sales staff are white women in those Lesley Gore hairdos. In the perfume section, a tall black woman in a pink suit sprays something on her left wrist, and then tries a second spray on the right. 'That one's lovely,' I hear her telling a smiling saleswoman. This is a revolution of sorts. Before 1980, stores on First Street didn't allow blacks inside. They had to shop via kiosk windows at the side of the store or in a back alley.

I look for coloured T-shirts and, instead, run into racks of safari suits – blue, tan, brown, even a crisp white, presumably for weddings. A clerk tells me to try Greatermans for T-shirts.

Back on the street, a newspaper vendor sells the daily for twelve Zimbabwean cents. Headlines speak of the impending wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, and of dissidents in Matabeleland. Nothing of consequence.

After a few more blocks, the comfortable distance between shoppers narrows. The broad landscape of First Street Mall shrinks to sidewalks no wider than my reach. Now I'm touching elbows, shoulders, backs and fronts. Children in tow scrape against my knees. A few people do a double take when they see me. Several gaze at my blue-striped Adidas running shoes. Though I'm the only white person in sight, I'm not frightened. I read curiosity, not hostility.

Foot traffic congests behind a white-bearded man who plods along with the aid of an intricately carved cane. As I overtake him, he stops and raises his hand to the brim of his porkpie hat.

‘Good morning, master,’ he says.

‘Good morning, sir,’ I reply and increase my pace.

Many shops profile their presence with three-foot-high speakers set on either side of the entrance. Distorted versions of local hits bounce off the passing crowds. The music complements the smell of chicken, fish and potatoes frying in near-rancid cooking oil. Diesel buses add their pungent billows of black smoke to the mixture.

I stop to examine the wares of a young watch repairman. He’s proudly mounted his 1976 certificate from the ‘Westchester School of Watch Repair’ in a well-worn plastic cover. I pick up a silver Elgin with an analogue dial from another era.

‘That one is self-winding,’ he boasts. ‘You never have to worry. Twenty dollars for you, my friend.’

He stands up and selects three or four other watches from his stock. ‘I also have these,’ he says, laying them across his thick wrist.

‘I’ll give you five dollars for the Elgin,’ I say.

‘I can’t take less than fifteen for such a masterpiece. A man offered me fourteen yesterday and I refused.’

‘I guess I don’t need it,’ I reply.

I’m not sure why I’m haggling with this man. It’s a way of making contact, I guess.

‘Okay,’ he says, ‘I’ll take that fourteen dollars today. Special reconciliation price.’

‘I’ll come tomorrow,’ I promise and walk away. He calls me back.

‘Sir, it will be gone by then. Take it for twelve.’ He smiles sheepishly, revealing the huge gap between his front teeth. I pull out a Zimbabwean ten-dollar bill plus two one-dollar coins and drop them in his hand. He straps the band around my wrist.

As I look at the watch, a flock of salespeople surrounds me. They offer combs, candy, doormats, baskets. A young man holding a piece of cardboard dotted with watch batteries begins to quarrel with an even younger girl hawking heart-shaped gold locket with an ‘I love you’ inscription. I’m not sure where all this is heading or if I’ll have to buy what they’re offering to escape unscathed.

Just as I’m about to run for it, the watch salesman intervenes. He puts an arm around me and waves the olive branch of his right hand. The cacophony of the sales pitches evaporates, as if the pontiff has spoken. ‘Give the gentleman a space to walk,’ he says.

The vendors separate. The crowd of pedestrians who have gathered to assess the disturbance returns to business as usual. Half a block away, I realise my watch is gone. Was the entire group in on the act or did an opportunistic thief merely take advantage of the situation? I don't know and I'm definitely not going back to ask.

I dart along the pedestrian path, dodging tiny piles of tomatoes, onions and bananas. Three for a dollar, four for a dollar, five for a dollar. Amidst this sidewalk commerce, unselfconscious mothers sit on kerbs nursing their babies. I'm not worrying about them though, or the street-corner shoe repairmen who beaver their way through stacks of pumps, wingtips and loafers in need of rejuvenation. My mind is on my wallet, my passport and any other target for a thief. I wonder if someone might try for my shoes.

As I reach the periphery of the shopping area, a young man in a navy blue sports jacket approaches. A silver cross hangs from a chain around his neck. He pulls a white handkerchief from his front pocket and dabs his forehead. The air is getting heavier, clouds are moving in.

'Sir, don't you want to last longer?' he asks me.

'Doesn't everyone?' I reply, unsure of where he's going with this.

'I have just the thing for you, mupfuwhira love potion plus my boom-boom.' He shows me some brown powder in a baby food jar.

'The perfect recipe for perfect love,' he assures me. 'With my boom-boom you can last the whole night. Even African women will love you, handiti?'

'I guess so,' I reply. He puts two little packets into the palm of my hand.

'Just five dollars for the two,' he says. 'Guaranteed. The madam is going to love you tonight.'

'I don't need them right now,' I reply. I drop the packets into his jacket pocket.

'Don't you want to last, sir? You can be as powerful as an African chief.'

'I guess not,' I reply, stepping back and patting my back pocket to make sure my wallet is still there. I leave him behind and set out in search of something to eat. I duck into a small café called Tafara Take-Aways. The minute I enter everyone goes quiet for a few seconds as they scrutinise the newcomer. I'm trying to read the menu on the wall while I hide my concerns about pickpockets and armed robbers.

An Indian man at the cash register looks over the heads of the six people in front of me in the line. 'Sir, can I help you?' he asks.

'Yes, but I'll wait my turn.'

'We can serve you now. No one will mind.'

I keep scanning the menu board. Two black men in front of me mumble to each other in Shona. 'We were here,' one of them says to the Indian man, who ignores them and keeps looking at me.

'What would you like, sir?' asks a plumpish black woman standing next to the Indian. She's wearing a blue apron. Someone in the line speaks to her in Shona. She spits back a reply. I should wait my turn, but I'm hungry and don't know how to handle the situation.

'Sadza,' I answer. She giggles at my reply. Sadza is a thick sort of porridge, something like grits. At least that's what one of my 3x5 cards says. It's supposed to be the nation's staple food.

'Would you like nyama or chicken?' she asks. Since I don't know what nyama is, I opt for chicken.

'And to drink, sir?' she asks. Her smile grows with each question.

'A Coke, please.'

I start to hand her the money but the Indian man reaches over and takes it. She brings me a Coke in a much recycled bottle, the kind we used to get when I was a Cub Scout. Part of the glass looks frosted. I like the feel of the cold, sweating bottle in my hand.

A couple of minutes later, the woman hands me a green metal bowl. I'm almost too nervous to eat. There's lots of chatter in Shona. War wounds could be close to the surface and I'm an easy scapegoat, especially after jumping the line. I remember the white driver's warning about the 'munts'.

The bowl holds four pieces of chicken, including a foot. The cook has poured gravy over the chicken but the little white mountain of sadza remains dry.

All five of the white plastic tables are occupied. I stutter-step as I walk away from the counter, trying to figure out where to sit. I want to avoid the man who objected to the Indian serving me first.

An old man eating alone pulls out a chair. 'You can sit here, sir,' he says, patting the seat of the chair.

'I'm Nyatsanza from Mutare,' he informs me as I get closer.

He holds out a limp wrist. I grab the top of his forearm and pinch it between my thumb and forefinger. Two young boys at the next table press

the backs of their hands to their mouths to conceal a snicker. A pair of women behind them give each other a smacking high five.

‘I’m Ben. Nice to meet you.’

As I look at his face, he turns away. One of his eyes has no iris. His overalls have a faint smell of engine oil. He must be on his lunch break.

‘I hope I haven’t disturbed you,’ I say.

‘No, sir. Not at all. We are all Zimbabweans now,’ he replies.

My eating utensil is a silver tablespoon with chips in the plating. I don’t know where to start.

‘Sir, you can wash your hands,’ Mr Nyatsanza tells me. He nods toward a wooden stand near the wall which supports a green metal bowl much larger than mine. A white hand towel with a few dirty finger marks hangs on a hook next to the stand.

I walk over to the bowl. Tiny food particles peek out at me through the cloudy water. My hands go into the cold liquid, slosh around a little bit, and then dry themselves on the towel. Ready to eat.

I’m not quite sure how to handle a chicken foot. I’m not even sure if I’m supposed to eat it. Maybe it’s like a ham bone, there to add flavour. A man at one of the other tables holds his chicken foot in both hands while he nibbles at the skin. I do the same and no one laughs. The chicken foot doesn’t have much to sink my teeth into and the sadza has no real flavour. When I spoon the gravy on top I can pretend it’s mashed potatoes.

As I scoop up the last piece of sadza, Mr Nyatsanza nods toward the hand-washing bowl. ‘It’s warm now, sir,’ he says.

Back I go, this time finding clear water and a slightly cleaner towel. I thank Nyatsanza for his hospitality and am leaving when I hear a banging on the window.

‘Sir, someone wants to speak to you,’ Nyatsanza says. He points to a face pressed against the front window of the shop. The watch repairman. Before my anger has a chance to boil over, he holds up my watch and motions for me to come outside. I tell him to come in. I don’t want another sidewalk convention of onlookers.

‘Sir, you dropped your watch,’ he tells me as he comes through the door. ‘We’ve been looking everywhere for you.’ He hands me the watch. He’s added a new leather band.

‘It’s still running,’ he boasts with that gap-toothed smile.

I offer him a reward but the most he will accept is a cold Coke, not enough to drown the shame of my mistrust.

At exactly 2.31 p.m. I head back to the hotel. A few clouds have rolled in. I wind my way through various gauntlets of polite but persistent street sellers. I've stopped worrying about my wallet.

Suddenly the skies pour forth like a summer storm in the Midwest. People run everywhere. I tuck myself next to a few damp bodies in the doorway of another café. After a few minutes, the rain stops and everyone returns to their normal activities.

With a clammy shirt and dripping hair, I re-enter the commercial fray. By the time I lie down on my bed again, I'm the owner of a soapstone rhino and a four-foot-tall giraffe whittled from a soft, light-coloured wood. Hilary might like it. Along the way I have also acquired a small bag of boom-boom for three dollars, in case I ever need to perform like an African chief.

Everything seems in order, though the giraffe doesn't stand quite straight on the floor. As I drift off to sleep I think I see it fall over.