

The Birds of Change

By

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Certain things just are. We don't question them. They happen so frequently that we expect them just to be. Like the sun rising every morning or birds flying south for the summer. Only here in South Africa, birds don't fly south, they fly north. So, it is with expectations. You never know what is going to happen.

December 1961 – Kolwezi, Belgian Congo

“Hurry up! You'll be late for school!” My mother strode into the kitchen and whisked the coffee off the stove before it boiled over. I happily ignored her urgency and continued in my dawdling, prolonging my inevitable trip to school. Eventually I put on my school clothes, brushed my teeth and washed my face. It was then that I heard Marcel knock softly on the kitchen door. I moved

silently to towards the kitchen, hiding behind the post so I could see him, in the hopes that he had brought me sweets. Marcel was my friend. He was the biggest, darkest man I had ever seen. He towered over everyone, even my Papa, who was over six foot tall. He always had a smile on his face and a song on his lips. Not today though. He paced, sweat beading on his forehead. He started to say something then caught sight of me.

“Go to your room!” he bellowed, and even my mother looked shocked. I scarpered, but only just far enough for them not to see me.

“What’s wrong Marcel?” my mother asked. “Sit down and have some coffee.”

My Papa, Pierre, watched this sombrely and asked, “It’s happening, isn’t it?”

Marcel looked down and when his eyes met my father’s they were moist.

“I’m sorry. I did what I could. The people are rising up. They want the Belgians out of the Congo. They are coming for you next.”

At this my mother dropped the glass coffeepot she held. Hot coffee splashed against the freshly cleaned cupboards and dripped onto the lemony scented floor. She began to tremble. My father got up and pulled her towards him in a hug.

“Don’t worry,” he breathed, “we knew that this day might come.”

“But we built a life here. Our children have friends. What about school?”

“We’ll all be fine. The children will adapt.”

At this, my father picked up his hat and went to Marcel who was staring out of the window gloomily.

“You have been a good friend to us. I will need your help one more time.”

“Of course,” he said.

I ran back into the kitchen. My mother was wiping her eyes. Marcel picked me up one last time into a giant bear hug and said, “You’re a little light that shines ever so bright. I will carry you in my heart until I am an old man.” I held his face in my hands, my lips were trembling. Tears spilled down my cheeks. I wanted to memorize every line and wrinkle, every piece that made Marcel. He was my friend. And I knew I would never see him again.

He turned and walked away. He seemed to have shrunk before my eyes. He would not live another year. He would be executed for apparent treason.

I began to pack my things. I thought it best to leave my mother to her thoughts. She seemed unnaturally calm. There was a sense of purpose about her and her brows were furrowed in concentration as her lips moved silently in prayer. She packed only essential items that were easy to carry. Every now and then she would run her hand lovingly over a piece of furniture and tears would spring into her eyes. That would be something we would leave behind. We would all begin our lives again with virtually nothing. It was like a fire had hazed over our very existence and we were made new. I wondered if this is what was meant by “baptism of fire.”

I wasn’t sure what to pack but I knew that it shouldn’t be too much. I left behind all my dolls, but one. Ghislaine was my favourite doll. She was porcelain and she had blue eyes just like

mine. Her hair was fair like the colour of sunbeams, as Marcel had once said. I had made her clothes myself. She wore a pink pinafore with little yellow daisies.

My brother Richard walked in. I waited for him to tease me about Ghislaine. He didn't. I began to feel afraid.

“Have you finished?” he asked, his face pale and sweaty as if he had run home from school, which he probably had. I nodded, quietly scanning the room with my eyes, making sure I had left nothing important behind.

My mother came to fetch us. We walked through the house silently accumulating the memories we had made over time, tucking them away in our hearts, knowing we would never come this way again.

My father was at the wheel of an old, slightly rusted, beige kombi. I wondered where our car was. We packed the kombi quickly, a sense of tension making us work diligently and urgently. My mother and I sat in the front with my father, and Richard found a small spot in the back. The kombi was packed with as many of our belongings as we could fit in. My mother had even managed to pack in the floor polisher. Everything smelled like rotting fish. I wrinkled my nose in distaste.

The engine started up and with much rattling and shaking, we were on our way. It was very green around us and we drove past the banana farm next door. I started to cry again. I had left my pet frogs behind on the windowsill of my room.

The day was clear and the sky blue. The kombi heated up quickly causing my dress to stick to the vinyl covers. The scenery changed from banana plantations and beautiful houses to busy streets and shops. We were in Elizabethville. My mother used to bring me here for a treat sometimes and Richard and I would go to the movies on a Saturday. It was still relatively early in the day and all the children were still at school. I could see the butcher, Monsieur Lepin sweeping his porch and Madame Laurent walking her two poodles. Everywhere I looked, vendors were calling out their wares to passing housewives. The housewives, in turn, were ignoring them, waiting for them to call out a better price. We drove to the outskirts of town and reached the border to Rhodesia before sunset. We drove on until the sun was about to set and then we stopped. We had run out of road some way back and had to drive carefully. If we got stuck here in the middle of nowhere there would be **no** help. The sunset, as usual, was stunning, but on this night even more so as the backdrop was the African bush and not buildings, streets and banana trees. We stopped the car and stretched our legs. Richard and I ran about chasing one other and getting rid of the pent up energy that had gathered by sitting in the car for most of the day. My mother built a small fire and soon we smelled the delicious aroma of her cooking. I do not remember what we ate that night, but I remember the loudness of the silence and the millions of stars when I looked up from my makeshift bed. I also remember that no one cried again. We had made it out of the country that had been our home with no injuries or attacks. My parents were relaxed and cheerful and Richard and I started to feel excitement of the adventures that awaited us. We slept soundly that night.

As the days began to blend into one another, the excitement of adventure waned. Other families joined us and we became a rather modern version of “pioneers”. We had no ox wagons; instead

we had Datsuns and Chevrolets. At night we would join together around a common fire and the adults would regale one another with stories of the past. I thought my mother had made too many hard-boiled eggs for the trip, but as it turns out, Madame Fiere made over a hundred. After the third day of travel, her husband made her throw them out. I don't think he ever ate eggs again.

My father shot small game to keep us fed and as more families joined he needed to find bigger game. One day he came across a pride of lions that had just made a kill. A Sable was big enough to feed everyone in the camp for a few days. He thought that shooting a couple of shots into the air would disperse them, but he did not count on the drought that year that had caused massive starvation in all the animals. One lioness would not give up her place and she growled ferociously. She advanced on my father, who at this point began to feel afraid. We needed the meat though, so he held his ground. It was then that my father reacted most unusually. He charged at her, waving his arms furiously, all the while singing "La Brabançonne", Belgium's national anthem. The lioness stopped in her tracks, turned and ran. I am pretty sure I would have done the same. That night, we could hear the men laughing and praising my father for his bravery. Someone passed a bottle of whiskey around and I fell asleep to the rumble of male voices.

I awoke the following morning to the grumbling of those same male voices. The women smiled secretly, whilst running about with glasses of water and headache tablets. We packed up our makeshift camp and continued our journey south. The landscape, as beautiful as it was, seemed barren at the same time and the moods of the people changed too. As we travelled further into the unknown, fear took the place of excitement and apathy rained down on us.

“What are we going to do when we get there?” my mother asked my father.

He slapped a mosquito on his neck and answered impatiently, “we’ll be fine!”

My mother’s face fell and he instantly felt shame. “We will get hold of Jeanne-Marie and her husband Jacques. They will be able to help us.”

My mother had to be satisfied with that. I looked at my brother who was still sitting in the back. He was reading a book, oblivious to the discussion around him. I wished that I had brought a book with.

Every day, families began to branch off. They would stay in Rhodesia and become farmers. Their adventures were beginning. I longed for ours to begin, but we were still days away from South Africa. We were, according to the map quite close to Salisbury, where we would spend Christmas.

24 December 1961- Salisbury

We arrived in Salisbury on Christmas Eve. What a bustling town! Everywhere I looked, I saw shops, beautifully decorated with tinsel and fake frosting. The frosting was actually white shoe polish applied to the windows with a sponge to give a snowy effect. I wanted to laugh because I had sweat running down my face and a rather large woman was standing outside the baker’s, fanning herself furiously. We climbed out the car and walked around in silence, marvelling at the beauty of “hustle and bustle” which had been sorely lacking of late. Many families here were also refugees that had fled from problem areas. Some had settled here while others, like us, were just resting for a bit before carrying on. A woman walked up to us and invited us to the Red

Cross tent. My father looked like he was going to refuse but a pleading look from my mother stopped him. She took my father to the men's tent where he was offered a beer while he waited for a bath and a shave. At once he looked happier. My mother and I followed the woman, Mrs Smith, to the women's tent, where we were given a proper bath and fresh, clean clothing. Mrs Smith gave me an orange and I was delighted! I had not had fresh fruit since we left the Congo. Sweet, sticky juice ran down my face and even my mother wasn't too concerned about my lack of manners. She smiled her first real smile since we had left. Mrs Smith gave my mother a beautiful dress and helped her fix her hair. We were going to a Christmas Party at the British Embassy that night.

The party was held outdoors, in a fruit orchard and many people came. It seemed as though everyone was invited. Lanterns hung from trees and cast a delicate glow over everyone. Tables and chairs were set under the trees and there was a dance floor in the middle. At one end stood the biggest Christmas tree I had ever seen. Candles decorated the tree and tinsel glinted in the soft light. There was a mountain of presents under the tree and I was envious of the children who would be so lucky to get gifts. The buffet table was laden with every kind of food imaginable and I was overwhelmed by choice. I selected a few items and went to sit with my brother who looked smart in a new suit.

"Isn't this wonderful?" He asked, his eyes shining brightly.

"Yes," I answered, feeling the same contentment that he did.

We watched as my father took my mother onto the dance floor and for a while they looked so in tune with one another that they seemed to be one. I had not seen them this relaxed in months and I realised that there must have been trouble brewing long before we ever found out that we had to

move. They made a handsome couple and people watched them move in time to the music. A trumpet blared and Father Christmas came walking between the tables towards the big Christmas tree. The adults began to round up the children. I was swept towards the front with the others. I wanted to tell them that they had made a mistake. I frantically looked around to see where my parents were and caught my mother's eye. She was smiling and mouthing that I should look to the front. Father Christmas began to give out gifts. Each gift had a name on. I was certain I would die of embarrassment if I didn't get a gift. Sure enough, he called out my name. I went to the front, my cheeks blazing with shyness and got my gift. I didn't even wait to get back to my place. I ripped off the paper and to my enormous delight found two books! They were not new, but I had not read them before. I was so happy I began to cry. This caused many a mother in the crowd to shed a tear too. As long as I lived I would never forget that night.

Three days later we left, feeling renewed, refreshed and determined. We drove all day and I often slept, the heat of the day lulling me. I read my books, joked with my brother and stared in awe at the strange trees that began to appear here and there. These were Baobabs, fat in the middle with little branches sticking out at the top. I laughed when my mother told my father that they reminded her of Richard's hair in the mornings.

We had only two days left of the trip when the unimaginable happened. The kombi broke down. It had overheated and now we were stuck in the middle of nowhere. After a quick scan of the engine, my father determined that the water cap must have fallen out while we were driving. We could keep filling the water tank up but we would not get far. My brother and I were sent to find water and after a few minutes I found a small stream. My brother brought the bottle and we

filled it and took it back to our parents. My mother, ever the resourceful one, had come up with a temporary solution. After filling the water tank, she took a sanitary towel and rolled it up carefully so that it would act as a plug, keeping the water in. I nearly died of embarrassment! My brother grinned and I looked away, my cheeks flaming bright.

The rest of the trip passed by uneventfully. We arrived in Pretoria on 1 January 1962. We breathed a sigh of relief and our kombi breathed its last. We met a Jewish man called Mr Zeidel who heard that we were in desperate need of a place to live. He invited us to dinner and offered my father work in a nearby engineering firm. He owned various businesses and blocks of flats in Pretoria and told my father that we could live in one rent free until the following month when he would receive his first pay check. When we went to view the place, he told us that the previous tenants had left behind a bed that we would be able to use. Strange how the bed was still wrapped in plastic sheeting. Here would be the place that our lives would really begin.

I am now in the sunset of my life and I marvel at this place called South Africa. I watch the sun rise and set every morning and I watch the birds fly north every year. I wonder if they know that I too flew south once and I hope they will be back next year. I have never had the desire to return. Maybe that's what makes us different to birds. It is the knowledge that you fly away from danger and learn from the past lessons, rather than repeat them. One day, I'll know for sure.

End