

CHAPTER 1

September 1977

Not a good sign.

Having smoothly sailed through passport control at the Johannesburg airport, I'd just attempted to go through the "Nothing to Declare" customs area. But airport security directed me to the row of people, mostly Africans, having their bags searched. My gut tightened, and my throat constricted, but I kept my face blank as I edged to the end of the line.

I was carrying a package for the African National Congress. Whatever was in it could land me in a Johannesburg or Pretoria jail, perhaps permanently.

I'd flown into South Africa from London, where I lived. The trip, via Zurich and Nairobi, was monotonous and unending, and I was exhausted. Flying South African Airways would have been less expensive and more direct, but I didn't want to support SAA,

given its history of ownership by the apartheid government. Now, I could barely stand as fear danced across my skin.

When it was my turn, I approached the two customs officers and opened my bag, my hands trembling slightly. One watched while the other pawed through my clothing and personal effects.

“What’s in this envelope?” he asked. The parcel was addressed to Jannie Du Preez in Cape Town, though that wasn’t its destination; I was to deliver it to someone in Pretoria. The return address was in the UK.

“Some magazines and a large bar of Belgian chocolate,” I lied, never having seen the contents, though I assumed it was bomb-making guides and a bar of Semtex, a plastic explosive. “I’m saving postage by mailing it from Johannesburg to Mr. Du Preez.”

“Chocolate, eh?” the officer said. Then he smiled, turned to his colleague, and said, “Maybe we should open it and taste it.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t,” I croaked, my knees wobbling, my belly cramping.

“Let’s see your passport,” the officer ordered. I handed it to him, and he continued, “You are Frank George, but this parcel is from William Brown.”

“Yes, I packed it with my friend William, whose address you see there,” I said, striving to remain calm and relaxed.

“Is there something to declare in this packet?” the officer asked, weighing the package with his right hand.

“No, it’s just magazines and chocolate,” I replied.

The guard looked me up and down, the envelope still bobbing in his hand. I could feel the sweat streaking down from my armpits as I wondered if this was the end of my brief career as an undercover agent for the ANC. An image of a dark gray prison chamber flashed through my mind.

“Yah, yah, that’s OK,” he said. “You can pack this up and go. Welcome to South Africa.”

A month earlier, I had discussed an unusual job opportunity with Walter Bennett, a senior researcher at Bagehot College in London, where I worked. I had been in London since leaving my home in Oregon three years earlier and was hoping to continue working overseas. Walter asked me to travel to South Africa to see if I was interested in supporting the African National Congress in its fight against apartheid. Walter knew I’d always said my life would include time spent helping to change the world toward a more just society. Until Walter challenged me with this project, I had expected my political activities would be done in my spare time—like my efforts for the Chile Solidarity Campaign, where my work was basic protest activities. The ANC work would be more substantive and dangerous, but Walter’s proposal resonated deeply with me.

Since the ANC was a banned organization, with many members and leaders in exile or jail—Nelson Mandela being the most prominent—my mission was clandestine. The plan was to travel to South Africa, spend some time pretending to be a tourist, deliver a package to a comrade in Pretoria, then travel to Swaziland to determine whether I would be willing to help the ANC covertly for a couple of years. Walter gave me ten days to decide. Then, if I agreed, my assignment was to find a job in Swaziland to fund my stay and cover up my ANC activities.

My initial hesitation stemmed from the sudden improvement of my prospects following a lucrative job offer in London at a prestigious economic consulting firm. My contract at Bagehot College had ended, and my new job was to begin in October. I

was further conflicted because of my comfortable loving relationship with Anne. My bonds with previous girlfriends had been stormy, but Anne was a devoted, caring person who was patient with my occasional excesses, political rants, and eccentric behavior. Sadly, I'd need to leave her behind if I decided to accept the mission. In good conscience, I couldn't bring such a gentle person to southern Africa for the ANC assignment: running guns.

But Walter was persuasive. He thought I was the best person for the mission because of my mental attitude, commitment to progressive movements, and pragmatic nature. Walter also enticed me with the adventure of working in an exotic country while supporting a worthy cause.

I still was torn, but I agreed to evaluate this ANC opportunity, believing it must be considered since it was consistent with my political convictions. Supporting the fight against apartheid appealed to me strongly. It would also allow me to see apartheid firsthand and visit Swaziland, a small developing country. Sort of like a vacation. If I decided not to remain and help the ANC, my newly enhanced salary would easily allow me to repay Walter for the trip.

“Sipho, take Mr. George's bag!” the hotel manager yelled.

I was shocked to hear how sharply the Johannesburg hotel managers, a husband-and-wife team, spoke to their staff. Their employees were all Africans, and the managers always addressed them in harsh commands. Particularly alarming was that this was an English-speaking couple, not Afrikaners. Given the history of antagonism between the English and the Afrikaners, as well as English support for ending slavery, I expected them to at least be courteous to their workers. This encounter was a rude awakening.

After the hotel manager checked me in and had my luggage

taken to my room, he surprised me by asking when I'd take my tea in the morning. There was no room service, but tea or coffee would be delivered to my room before breakfast. I requested coffee.

The African tea lady came at 6:30 a.m., knocked quietly, and handed me my coffee on a saucer in a submissive manner, her head lowered, her left hand at her right elbow in a sign of respect. I almost reassured her that she could treat me as an equal but held my tongue.

The dining room was spartan at breakfast, with the hired help doing everything—taking orders, preparing the food, and serving it. The hotel managers regularly peered into the room, checking on their African workers. All the hotel patrons were White. The Black servers bustled among us, catering to our every whim. One of the couples complained brusquely to their waiter about the temperature of their coffee. The attendant ran to get a fresh pot.

After dining, I approached the manager and his wife to ask about sightseeing.

“Well, there is not much to see in Johannesburg, but the jacaranda trees might be blooming in Pretoria,” the manager said. “You could also visit the Voortrekker Monument on your way there. Our Afrikaner clients especially enjoy visiting it.”

“OK. Thanks. I was also thinking of visiting Swaziland.”

“Oh, there is nothing much there unless you like to gamble.”

“I heard they have a game park.”

“Oh, that's nothing, not even a little zoo. If you want to see big game, you should go to Kruger National Park. You'll see many animals there if you get a good guide.” He paused before continuing, “We have a very orderly country here. Foreigners do not understand us. We provide a good life for our African friends. They are like children, and we take care of them. They could not

manage without us. We give them jobs and a place to stay. They would have nothing without us.”

His wife chimed in, “Yes, that is exactly right. They are like children, and you must watch them all the time to make sure they do not get into mischief.”

“OK,” I said, unnerved by my unintentional collaboration in their denigration of Africans.

My usual manner of exploring a new city is on foot, so I walked out of the hotel after breakfast, feeling strange. First, I was here as a fake tourist. Next, my vacations were usually shared with friends or lovers, but I was alone. Finally, I couldn’t stop thinking about South Africa’s troubled past and apartheid policies.

A month earlier, Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, had disobeyed the government’s banning order, which confined him to King William’s Town, and traveled to Cape Town with Peter Jones to engage with various activists. But no one would see Biko because, as a banned person, he wasn’t allowed to travel and meeting with him would be illegal. On their return trip, Steve and Peter were stopped at a roadblock and arrested. Biko was still in jail, but no one knew where. Twenty people had died in police custody over the past year, so progressives worldwide were concerned about his well-being.

The South African authorities hadn’t yet banned the BCM. Biko and others had created the organization on the premise that Blacks needed to fight for democracy and political change and that, if they were to be free, they must believe in themselves and their own value. Believing Blacks were equal to Whites contradicted the entire construct of apartheid.

Such thinking led to the Soweto uprising just the previous year in 1976. Students objected to the decision to teach lessons using

Afrikaans, the language of their oppressors. On June 16, 1976, an estimated twenty thousand students from Soweto schools came together to march in protest. After the police opened fire on the demonstrators, riots spread throughout Soweto, and in the days that followed the township seemed to be on fire. At least 176 people and perhaps as many as 700 were killed over the next few weeks. The reports of such atrocities led me to be here, walking through Johannesburg, wondering what I should do about it.

The city's noise filled the air: the traffic, people chatting in English and Afrikaans, and the occasional siren. While wandering, I happened upon Joubert Park. The park had some of the famous jacaranda trees of South Africa, but it was too early in the spring for them to be in bloom. Nevertheless, the trees were magnificent, their branches snaking impressively toward the sky. The grass was still brown from winter, but many plants were a healthy green. Most of the foliage was trees and bushes: palm trees, many exotic plants unknown to me, a few spruce trees, and many holly bushes. The sun warmed my skin and caused the plants to give off an evergreen scent with cinnamon notes.

The stroll in the park was enjoyable, but when I wanted to sit down to relax, I couldn't bring myself to sit on a bench labeled "Europeans Only." Even the fact that the only children present were White, many attended by their African nannies, bothered me. So instead, I walked around, enjoying the scenery and the park's beauty. It felt bizarre to be in a communal area with Whites-only benches, but my mission precluded making political comments.

When in an unfamiliar city, my inclination is to visit museums, something I got from my mother, an artist. I decided to visit the Johannesburg Art Gallery, located in the park. The JAG's collection included seventeenth-century Dutch paintings,

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art, and South African art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The museum was impressive in size and a pleasant surprise, altering my view of South Africa as an uncultured country.

Upon leaving the museum, I spotted a small café and had lunch. Like all restaurants in the city, the service was for Whites only, the servers were African, and the food was bland. It was impossible to feel comfortable eating in an all-White café in a country where eighty percent of the people were non-White. I finished eating quickly and left.

After lunch, I explored Hillbrow, a liberal neighborhood in Johannesburg adjacent to Joubert. Though officially White-only, the authorities turned a blind eye to Blacks living there. Here, people of different races intermingled, and I noticed gay couples holding hands, which was exhilarating after the staid atmosphere of the park and the café. A street busker played a guitar and harmonica while singing “Blowing in the Wind.” Occasionally, I detected the smell of marijuana, *dagga* in the local parlance. The streets were narrower, and the gritty smell of car fumes and people’s sweat clothed the air. I roamed the streets, enjoying the ambiance.

The dinner was basic fare at the hotel: a chewy steak, potatoes, and peas. Eating alone in a hotel isn’t the most gratifying of experiences, but I was determined to enjoy myself as much as possible, so I asked for some red wine. The Shiraz, a well-known varietal in South Africa, was surprisingly good. My knowledge of wine was limited, but I’d taken a wine-tasting course while vacationing in Paris one winter. This wine burst in my mouth like a cascade of blackberries.



In Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, I checked into a hotel for two nights. First, I needed to give the package to the designated person near the zoo. Then, I would visit the Voortrekkers Monument and the botanical gardens the next day. Finally, I would go to Swaziland, having dispensed with my “tourist” activities. I wasn’t sure how this sightseeing and a trip to Swaziland would help me decide whether to aid the ANC. And I couldn’t stop thinking of the cushy job in London and the softness of Anne’s neck. Nevertheless, I would try to make the best of it.

As I approached the zoo, I found myself in a bustling market for African handicrafts, where the smell of *mielies*—boiled white corn in its husk—permeated the air, along with a spicy aroma of curried meat. In addition to food, woven baskets, bead jewelry, bracelets made from horn and elephant hair, and wood carvings of animals and masks were for sale. Music was coming from car radios, and everyone was talking at once, hawking their wares or speaking to each other. The colorful clothing and wares of the Africans were refreshing compared to the sterility of the government buildings I had walked by earlier.

My ANC mission was to locate a vendor selling elephant-hair bracelets and say, “The weather here is spectacular, and the jacarandas are fabulous.” The person was to respond with, “Seven elephant hair bracelets will bring you good luck and great fortune.” I had placed the envelope in a brown paper bag to make it less conspicuous.

Unfortunately, there were several vendors with this type of bangle. After approaching two and not getting the correct response to my remarks, I felt the hairs on the back of my head bristle; someone was watching me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a large White man, plainly dressed but vaguely looking at the goods in the last stall

I'd visited. He followed me as my meandering took me to various booths with bracelets. Nevertheless, I persevered, and my weather-and-jacaranda phrase finally received the appropriate response. After setting the package down, with the intent of leaving it behind, I began to haggle with the vendor.

"Well, I'll just have to buy seven bracelets for myself and my friends, won't I," I finally said. After making sure my careful examination of the goods was obvious, I selected seven, bargained the price down a bit, paid, and walked away.

"You forgot your bag!" someone said, and I turned to face the man who had been trailing me. He held the package at his side; I couldn't read his expression. I froze.

"Oh, thank you," I said, reaching out my hand. "How forgetful of me."

He remained quiet, watching me, the bag in his hand beside his thigh. Finally, he looked down at it. "I guess it couldn't be important to you; maybe I should keep it," he said.

"It's a gift for a friend. I'd prefer you return it."

I stood, my hand outstretched, waiting for his next move, my stomach tautly clenched.

This can't be happening, I thought, my arm trembling.

"Ach, no problem, I was just joshing you," he said, proffering the bag to me. "You're a tourist here, eh? I am too. Visiting from Bultfontein, a small town south of here. You're American."

"Yes, but I've been living in the UK most recently," I said.

"Huh, I've never been," he said. "Say, we're both alone in a new town. Would you like to go for a coffee?"

"Uh, no. That's very kind, but I have a lot to do today," I said.

"Yah, OK. I understand," he said, rubbing his chin and looking thoughtful. Then, he turned and walked away.

Just a South African tourist. What a relief; it would've been disastrous to have lost the parcel. Before returning to the comrade, I wove among the stalls, viewing the trinkets, struggling to act as naturally as possible. After the packet was set down, he made sure no one was looking before whisking it under a blanket. He thanked me, and I entered the zoo, mission accomplished. I felt depleted. Delivering a parcel had been unexpectedly nerve-racking. And yet, as I reviewed what had transpired, I realized nothing had happened.

Was I mentally fit for this assignment?

After finishing my zoo visit, I strode into the street and was buffeted by the nervous energy in the air. What had happened? Several small groups of Blacks huddled outside the gate, groaning and sobbing. A hysterical woman was shrieking while others tried to console her. Their faces pinched in anxiety, the Whites on the street were rushing to their cars and speeding away. Finally, I spotted someone absorbing a newspaper. After reading the front page, my jaw dropped in disbelief, a wave of grief swept through my body, and finally, with tears welling up in my eyes, a fierce fury overwhelmed me.

BIKO DIES IN DETENTION

How could I be passive in the face of this latest atrocity? I couldn't. I decided to spend the next few years helping the ANC fight apartheid.