



PART ONE
AFRICA

CHAPTER ONE

STARTING OVER

The plane from Cape Town was crowded. Most of the passengers were white and appeared well-off, dressed in crisp khaki and headed home from shopping in South Africa for the essentials they could no longer find in Zimbabwe. I'd heard that in the years since the civil war had toppled white rule in the country formerly known as Rhodesia, it had become nearly impossible to buy anything that wasn't made there. Now a trip to the store for toothpaste required international travel. We flew over dusty plains and bouldered outcroppings. As the plane traveled into Zimbabwe and made its descent, I saw that the airport at Bulawayo, which I remembered as a grand place, was little more than a crumbling airstrip in the middle of a scrubby field. We landed, pulled up to the terminal, and got off at Gate 5—an amusing conceit, as it was the only gate. Inside I noticed a few game heads on the walls, forlorn reminders of a different time.

The lines in the immigration area were long and slow. The thump of papers and passports being stamped echoed monoto-

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nously. When I at last reached the front, I handed my passport to a young black officer in a starched uniform. He looked at it for a long moment and then up at me.

“You were born here, in Bulawayo?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Welcome back, sir,” he said, stamping my passport and waving the next in line forward.

I rented a car and drove through town, which took only a few minutes. After thirty years, everything looked familiar but in disrepair. The streets were crowded with people. AIDS had begun its hollowing out of the population, and nearly everyone I saw was either young or old. There was nobody in between, and nobody seemed to have anything to do. A little beyond the edge of town opposite the airport, I came to our old house. It looked more or less as it had, though it was now surrounded by a high wall. A steel gate guarded the entrance to the driveway. A sign of different times. As I looked the place over, two young boys tore around the property on small motorbikes. I remembered how my father often spent his weekends perched on a low stool weeding the lawn, looking smart in his bush hat and listening to the cricket matches on a transistor radio. Presently, a Mercedes swept up to the gate. An impatient-looking white woman honked the horn, and a gardener ran over to let her in before going back to his watering.

I headed for Whitestone, the boarding school I had gone off to as a young boy. The dirt road was now tarred, and houses stood in rows on either side where the bush had once crowded in. There were children in the schoolyard, both black and white. This I'd expected, though the fact that half were girls brought me up short. Whitestone had been a boys' school in the grim English tradition when I'd attended, run by incompetent instructors whose ignorance and cruelty were thought to be the best sort of influence on the leaders of the future. This

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had been a torture then reserved for whites only. I'd hated every minute of it. The students no longer wore khaki but were now smartly turned out in crimson jackets with a bird embroidered on the front pocket. The school itself appeared little changed. I ruefully contemplated the motto over the door: *Veritas Omnia Vincit*. Truth conquers all. It's a concept that's easy to believe until you've lived long enough to see through it.

Farther out of town, I stopped in at Falcon College, where I attended high school, "college" being an English term for secondary school. Falcon was located on the site of an abandoned gold mine, whose plain stone buildings had been converted to classrooms and dormitories. I remembered the swelter of classes beneath those corrugated iron roofs as the African sun burned its way across the day. Now there was air-conditioning. And just as at Whitestone, the school was fully integrated. Students went about campus in mixed groups, seemingly oblivious to race. They proved a point I would not make out until years later, when a classmate wrote about it in the Falcon newsletter. Falcon had become a color-blind oasis in the heart of Africa, a living model for what some had once hoped all of Rhodesia could become. That was not to be.

My father was a doctor. He had sided with the liberals in Rhodesia. They favored an orderly transition away from white minority rule. The exclusion of blacks from the colonial government was wrong, he believed, and would end either well or badly. White rule did end, though not while my father was alive to see it, and not in the way he hoped it would. Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in a cataclysm of bloodshed and terror. Its black citizens, most of them uneducated and possessing no knowledge of the outside world, were ill prepared for liberal, Western-style democracy. The concept of "one man, one vote" is fair enough. But when the average person cannot read or write, does not know that the oceans and continents exist, has

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no idea even that there are other countries, other people—then the idea of self-rule falls down, because a vote is going to be for sale. And they were. Zimbabwe is a country now run by a corrupt, authoritarian black government that exploits its citizens more brutally than the white government ever did. That is Zimbabwe's history and its torment.

I'd come back to Africa to see all this for myself, but also because I'd recently experienced a calamity of my own. I'm a heart surgeon. My career had taken off in the pioneering days of heart transplantation, a life-saving operation that I'd helped make routine. At a young age, I'd been given my own cardiac center at a major university in America and turned it into the world's busiest heart-transplant hospital. And then, abruptly and unjustly, I was forced out, my reputation in tatters. I'd been a success in every way except at perceiving the envy that gnawed at the people I worked with. I loved what I was doing and assumed that everyone around me did, too. I was wrong.

One of my favorite stories when I was growing up was the Greek myth of Daedalus and his son, Icarus, who escaped their confinement on the island of Crete by flying away on wings Daedalus fashioned from branches of willow bound with wax. Daedalus, fearful of the hazards of the journey and seeing his son's rapture at the prospect of flight, warned Icarus to fly safely above the sea, but not so near the sun as to melt his wings. Icarus ignored this advice to stay on the middle course, instead soaring high into the sky. And when his wings melted, he fell into the sea and was lost.

The lesson of Icarus is that excessive pride or self-confidence can be fatal, though I never saw it exactly that way. To me Icarus was not foolish, but bold. Wanting to do something great isn't hubris, to my way of thinking, but neither is it entirely safe. Extraordinary achievement does not lie along the middle course. Heart surgery is not for the timid, and in the

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beginning every breakthrough carried immense risk. Doctors and their patients flew not just close to the sun but directly at it. For me it was intoxicating. True enough, when I did fall, it was a long way down. I'd lost almost everything. But soon I'd be ready to go up again. My visit to Africa was a prelude to starting over.

I have always enjoyed heights, the thrill of pioneering achievement, despite the risks.

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