

The Last Day

Pattering, free, in great circles across a carpet of fallen msasa leaves, their dying red and gold contrasting with the beige of his early winter coat, black saddle and gay plume of a tail, he was the reason I do not have a dog today.

As I strode along, head down and hands in camouflage pockets, he foraged and ferreted happily with me as the center of his world. In my mind's eye I could not see anything but this for us. As I watched my dusty boots appearing and disappearing beneath me I tried and failed to imagine that there could be other lives.

We took the path that led us by the easiest route to the top of the escarpment, and yet I was breathing hard by the time it leveled off and became a table of wind polished granite, shadowed by the last sheer slabs above. There was a silence broken only by the dry scuttling of lizards leaving their basking spot to the intruders and the wind-blown leaves. Out of habit, I set my back to the rocks and squatted, watching the trail behind us. He dropped at my quiet click, tongue lolling happily and velvet ears half back.

I knew that the up-draught from the valley below had told him we were alone and that nothing within two hundred yards could move without his knowledge. Still, in my human vanity, I played at being a hunter and stayed as I was for the regulation span of time.

Lizards edged back out of their crevices and I stood and let the blood back into my legs. Far away, the disembodied beat of a chopper stopped his panting for a moment and he looked up at me.

"Not today, old man." I murmured, and he turned his interest to a persistent fly, the quick snaps eventually successful, so that he gagged and rolled his tongue until the tiny, sodden carcass was expelled to be sniffed at where it lay on the leaves.

I propped Fabrique Nationale 7.62mm rifle number 1045 against an outcrop, never as important a part of my life as P.D. Ricky No 93. In fact, we usually worked with an Israeli UZI, or in earlier times with an old British Sterling. Somehow, the weight went unnoticed until you put it down and then there was something missing until it was taken up again.

It was a Sterling magazine that I dropped on one sweep through a silent, shadowed gorge near Hartley. And it was Ricky who found it, while a friendly chopper pilot held the right wheel of his whining craft resting lightly on a boulder as the blades whipped the sullen green water into wavelets on the other side.

Ricky disappeared into the impenetrable tangle of riverine bush and I waited, crouched beneath the downdraught of the whirling blades. It seemed ages before he returned, the curved magazine held high and that banner of a tail waving triumphantly. The pilot grinned and applauded one-handed against his thigh and that night the story gained in the telling as the pilot bought me beer, while Ricky snored in the far corner of the mess.

And yet, these were just tricks, demonstrations of his natural ability put to use, that they pleased me and earned my approval was enough for him.

It was Ricky who kept me warm the freezing July night I huddled alone in a deserted and crumbling tobacco barn with no blankets or other comforts. The Viljoen bodies and their orphaned baby had been swept away. Cartridge cases had been collected, photographs taken and the silent Special Branch men were in conference with the shadows that drifted in from the Mopani scrub before disappearing again like smoke.

At a collection of wattle and daub huts, the spoor merged with the myriad tracks of cattle and bare feet, and even Ricky had been forced to concede defeat. For four miles from the tragic scene, he had clung to the trail, head down and quartering great stretches of blonde stubble or drifting dust, the line slack and then taut as he searched for and then found some invisible, vestigial trace to lead him to the next.

Only twice I called him in to me. To pull his ears and say the things only we two knew, my support group standing or crouching silently, eyes on the watching bush and impatient to be off again.

Although it was winter, the heat was crushing and the precious water I splashed into my hat ran mostly through the stitching so that he worked with a raging thirst. It had been a long morning for Ricky. The night was an eternity for me. Three days later, blankets and food were flown in. For us, Ricky caught a rat and a farm chicken.

When we weren't out there, we worked the usual police shifts. There were other dogs in the kennels, but Ricky treated them with contempt. There

was Bruce, with his slim, assassin's body and the cold eyes of a tundra wolf. Jiro, huge ex-guardian of the Japanese Trade Commission, until they off-loaded him as a donation, driving away hastily lest we question their scars. And Peter of the teddy bear appearance, twin brother of Shane and as gentle as the other was savage. There were the usual predictable Rexes and Majors and Princes, a few Blackies, and even a Sergeant, one of Ricky's sons.

The most beautiful name I ever heard for a dog came from Cst Joramu, diminutive Shona reprobate that he was. As Peter streaked across a dark street one night in pursuit of his man, he was struck by a speeding Volkswagen. As his broken ribs healed, he developed a strange blood disorder, and Joramu, his battered face as impassive as ever, accepted my offer of one of Ricky's pups for himself. I remember him standing there at the puppy-run, Peter panting quietly and painfully at his feet. When at last, he leaned over the wire and scooped up his choice, I asked him what he would call it. The smoky eyes looked into mine and he hesitated only a moment before he said "Zhure Pamwe - In Shona it means "My Heart"

As it turned out, Peter lived many years. He was the dog at Joramu's side when he challenged Joshua Nkomo - one man in uniform against a thousand followers of a political demi-god. Nkomo exhorted his retinue to overwhelm the troublesome police obstacle to their invasion of Gwelo city center, a pudgy finger pointing at Joramu "Remember this man's face when we have freedom! He is a sell-out - a tshombe - he must die then!!!" Joramu's contemptuous reply was drowned by the thunder of the crowd departing hurriedly in the face of Peter's short, snarling rush. Nkomo narrowly made it, and his Ford Zephyr shot away in indecent haste, leaving man and dog standing there in the dust amongst the shoes and hats and an assortment of sticks.

Mostly we worked our cases alone. Together, we drove the dusty, rutted roads of the Midlands by day or by the yellow lights of PR 7677 pull into another silent farmyard or mission station to start work.

There would be coffee to drink and a scene to study before I shook out the line and let him go free. I remember the smell of his harness, saddle soap smooth and as supple as doeskin in my hands, the braided hemp line that I preferred laid out behind the start of the spoor. He would come in at my call, shake himself and sit quietly as I buckled the harness.

At the heel, we would approach some faint trace where he would gravely bend his head to take scent. For all the times that it happened, I never got used to that rush of excitement as the line snapped taut. Sometimes, we found our quarry, sometimes only signs of his passing, but to this day, I remember every one of those silent hunts.

He was patient with me, with my clumsy attempts to teach him his job. It was he who found the shred of jacket-lining on the barbed wire at Selukwe. And me who pulled him away from it in my haste to close the gap between us and the housebreaker, possibly already speeding north on the night train to Salisbury.

The reproach was there in Ricky's eyes, as he returned to the fence, ears back in defiance, to nose the tiny scrap of material in the yellow torchlight. Six months later, the forensic scientist who compared it with the rent in the windbreaker of Oscar Dube alias Lidwell Shangwe, alias Joe Sibanda, must have thought it fairly commonplace evidence. The magistrate who invoked the indeterminate sentence on Dube as an habitual criminal didn't agree.

So many patrols, so many long nights together. The only time I ever saw him afraid was when a leopard haunted our river camps in the Valley. When the second coughing grunt broke the silence he crept between my drawn-up knees and snarled his own challenge. Doubtless, in his faith, he thought I could protect him from the big cat. I forgave him that atavistic weakness. He had protected me from far more certain dangers by his presence alone.

Before the bad times, it was Belingwe district where we loafed our way through rural patrols, sleeping in District Commissioner's camps and calling on locals to show the flag. Ricky was a star ally in those visits. He would lie at my feet, head on his paws, watching every move about him. At some opportune moment, I would give him a quiet command that sent him to the Land Rover, returning with my bush-hat or whatever else bore my scent. The white policeman's dog was truly amazing, said the chorus of hushed voices behind the pink palms.

And then one day, it was all over. Ricky was older now and so was I. And when the man from Johannesburg told me I had a future in sales, I believed him. The days were passing swiftly and I had no more tomorrows. Larry was staying on, to farm and to make something of what was left. Ricky, after I had blurred and ceased to be, would enjoy the sun

and peaceful retirement, twitching in his sleep at some half remembered hunt, until one day he was still.

We watched the sunset together and I tried to find the words. At last, I touched him and we left.

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Mike Job