

PART I

IGNORANCE &
BELLIGERENCE

C H A P T E R O N E

I 9 9 4

I REMEMBER THE DISGUSTED LOOK on the face of the elderly white lady next to me on the plane. Incessantly wriggling in the middle seat, her body leaned towards the pretty, young blonde in the seat closest to the window. They both looked at me as if I did not belong 15 000ft feet in the air. In all fairness, I was the only person of colour on the aircraft. Even the hostess served me the steaming foil tray of fish and vegetables with some reluctance.

“The food isn’t bad,” I said, turning to the elderly white lady before unravelling the plastic cutlery intertwined with a white serviette.

“Excuse me, Miss,” she called to the stewardess, ignoring my comment.

“What can I do for you, Ma’am?”

“I ordered the fish, not the chicken. This is chicken.”

“I’m afraid we’ve run out of the fish. The gentleman next to you was served the last fish meal on board.” Her smile faded at the sight of my face.

“Can I perhaps make it up to you with another glass of wine instead?”

“I ordered the fish,” she replied curtly.

“Take mine,” I gesticulated to my tray. “We can swap. I would prefer the chicken anyway.”

The elderly white lady turned towards the pretty blonde at the window who was already wolfing down her vegetables: “This black man thinks I’m going to eat his food.”

The pretty girl awkwardly stopped eating, and the air stewardess scurried to a nearby passenger who didn’t appear to need assistance. The elderly white lady stared out the window and ate nothing for the remainder of the flight. I enjoyed my fish and eventually asked her if she was going to eat her unwanted meal, but she didn’t once acknowledge my presence. I felt sorry for her, and I felt sorry for the girl next to her, too. They were both accustomed to the notion that the colour of one’s skin warranted a difference in treatment. The air stewardess was forced to endure my black skin, short curly hair, and general features typical of a black South African man. But the other two were not bound by the niceties that came with the transaction of service and money.

“Are you from South Africa? Your accent is quite unusual,” the blonde asked the old lady, handing over her tray to the hostess.

“I’m returning home to Johannesburg, but just for a quick visit to see my family.”

“A quick visit – why? I’m excited to spend some time away from London – maybe go on a few safaris,” the blonde said.

“I’m scared to see what my country has become since I was last there 10 years ago.”

Had they allowed me to contribute to their introductions, I would have found it difficult to disagree with the old lady. I, too, was apprehensive about the transformation in our country. News of the abolition of Apartheid in South Africa had spread, like the clouds that cover the Johannesburg sky in the height of summer. Celebrations seemed to be abundant, like the winter rains I had once felt in the heart of Cape Town, on the west coast of the country. Spirits soared high, like the massive Marula trees that tried to touch the sky when I was a young boy.

But the good news, celebrations and high spirits were only as alluring as the media allowed the rest of the world to believe. I knew that segregation

was ingrained. It had lasted for too long to simply disappear into the promises of a new tomorrow. There was significant work to be done, and I was determined to contribute to the progression of the black community. It was a new era that required new aspirations.

A voice boomed over the loudspeaker: "On behalf of the cabin crew, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for flying British Airways. We have begun our descent into Jan Smuts International Airport. Please ensure your tray table is up, your baggage has been stowed in the appropriate compartments and your backrest is upright. Cabin crew: Please prepare for landing."

The aircraft soon completed its descent and wobbled to a standstill, to the relief of the two passengers who had still not acknowledged my courtesy. As I helped secure the hand luggage for the frail, elderly woman who could barely stand, a man three rows away shouted: "Hey you!"

"Me?" I answered, surprised.

"Yes, you! Don't touch the *Tannie's* bag without her permission!"

I released the brown leather carrier bag back into the overhead compartment as if it were a hot flame in my hands. Having said nothing to the enraged man, pretty blonde, discourteous lady or any of the other passengers, I quickly made my way out of the aircraft and walked briskly towards the baggage claim. I wanted to get my luggage out of the airport and to the car park as swiftly as possible.

Relief washed over me when I saw other faces of colour. Most of them were cleaning staff and waiters delivering food to delighted white people in restaurants and bars. The airport was big and busy, but not as extensive as Heathrow International.

"Watch where you're going, monkey!" An angry traveller collided with me, forcing me to bang my trolley into a collection of tables and chairs at one of the restaurants.

I collected my luggage, which had fallen off the trolley, and picked up my speed. The sound of laughter from a nearby group of youngsters, combined with the looks of embarrassment from my fellow brothers and sisters serving tables, made me temporarily regret returning to Johannesburg.

“Perhaps Cape Town will be better,” I mumbled to myself, as I stood in the waiting area of the bustling pick-up zone.

“Are you rushing to leave us again? You’ve just arrived home and you’re already talking yourself into going.”

Kerry-Anne snuck up and provided a tight, much-needed hug from behind – despite somehow managing to carry a basket filled with oranges, nectarines and plums and a large bunch of handpicked sunflowers.

“There’s that beautiful smile,” she announced with delight.

“Can we get to the car? I’m exhausted and the flight was rather long,” I replied.

Rudeness wasn’t common between us, and I immediately felt guilty for my curt response to someone I loved dearly, whom I hadn’t seen in many months.

“I’m sorry we haven’t been to London,” she apologised softly, steering the black and grey Mercedes through several lanes of traffic to the exit of the busy airport. “The wedding is going to be beautiful! Everyone’s awaiting your arrival before the real festivities begin.”

Briefly shutting my eyes as she continued to drown out the radio with her sweet, soft voice, I thought about Lisa: I thought about the girl with whom I had grown up. I couldn’t believe that she was about to embark on a new adventure without me. She was my sister and my best friend. Above all else, during those times when, as young children, we would play outside in the garden, she was a symbol of hope that white people would one day embrace other races.

“Sisonke! Sisko – we’re here!”

Time had flown by. Before I knew it, we were driving around the elaborate fountain surrounded by lush, green trees, and pulling up at the front door of a place I had called home for many years. It was hardly a house. Filled with innumerable bedrooms; winding corridors and expensive furnishings, it was a mansion in the north of Johannesburg. As the car came to a gradual stop, I gazed at the immense structure. I had forgotten that the estate was as broad as a rugby field; I had forgotten that when I was a boy, the roof almost touched the sky, like the Marula trees I so admired when I

was growing up. Length and height aside, as Lisa rushed through the large, wooden doors, I recognised that it would always be home.

“Of course you’d be the last one to arrive!” she exclaimed, pouncing on me with a warm embrace and gentle kiss on the forehead.

“I thought you’d stopped growing,” I joked, as an unfamiliar staff member took my bag.

“I’m almost as tall as you,” Lisa yelled.

Kerry-Anne added: “You’re both unusually tall. If it wasn’t for Lisa’s long, blonde hair, I swear I wouldn’t be able to tell you twins apart. Lisa, at the airport I caught Sisko talking himself into leaving for Cape Town.”

“He thinks he’s awfully important now that he’s the new Professor of Statistics at the University of Cape Town,” Lisa teased.

We continued to rag each other in the manner that had always been comfortable and familiar in our relationship. On the rare occasions we had been able to share each other’s company over the past two years, Lisa had summoned up her inner child. Dissertations and lectures filched much of my time, and Johan stole a lot of hers. Her fiancé was typically Afrikaans, a second generation of a dynasty built on farming: hunters who loved the thrill of the chase and kill. They were rugged South Africans. I knew that I was hypocritical to form assumptions based on the information she had provided on our rare get-togethers in London. However, during that period of history, assumptions were particularly powerful.

We were soon inside the main living room, which was laden with custom-made wooden furniture and trinkets from around the world. Lisa’s father had collected them during his lifetime. I had loved Doug. He had kindly welcomed an orphan of colour into his handsome home. Kerry-Anne hadn’t offered him many choices, and Lisa’s unbreakable bond with me couldn’t have provided him with a stronger reason to keep me around.

“Where is your mind wafting off to today?” Lisa questioned with annoyance, sipping on tea and handing me a freshly baked buttered scone.

The living room suddenly filled with the aroma of baked delicacies and rooibos tea.

“I was just thinking about your father. I think about him a lot.”