

Where Will You Go?

by David P. Gontar (February 2015)

“Where will you go?” she demanded, her voice ragged with exhaustion.

“North to Moatize.”

“There is nothing there. We will perish.”

“I will find work.”

“You are a fool. Join the militia, they have guns and take what they need.”

“Bandits.”

“Are not you a bandit? You stole me from my father’s house and put a baby in my belly. Now you are afraid and want to desert us.”

Shadows of despair skirted her eyes. He had never noticed them before. Each of her words sounded as though it might be her last. Could death give birth to life? “There is work in the north,” he insisted. “A coal mine. Ezekiel has seen it. He told me. Along the Muntizi the stuff is so plentiful you can scoop it up in your hands. In a few months a man has enough money to buy land. You will eat and drink, and bear a fine fat son. I must go.”

“Ezekiel is a ne’er-do-well, a dreamer. His head is as empty as your stomach.”

“He is my friend.”

“Two fools. Let me tell you what you will find in Tete. The English are not like the Portuguese. They make slaves of all the Bantu people. You’ll be captured and wear irons on your ankles. When you are no longer useful they’ll push you off a cliff.”

It took him four days to reach the caves controlled by the militia, four days without sustenance. On the edge of the camp he buckled over in the tall grass and was hauled before their leader, a fierce giant clad in raw wool, leather and a spiked vest. His grimy face gleamed in the firelight as he gesticulated at Umberto.

“Is this a fighter?”

Everyone laughed.

Next afternoon they fell in fury on Chigubo, running amok in rape and butchery. Umberto roamed amongst the flaming cottages scavenging for bits of yam, bean curds and any unscorched cowrie shells. When his new associates disappeared into the jungle he turned towards home.

"Is this all you bring us?" Bess challenged him when he stood before her. "You will be hunted down and tied to a stake. The ants will consume you. There is no hope for us now." She wept piteously, her head hidden in emaciated palms. Seeing her was like confronting a stranger. He could make no connection between the hysterical creature writhing on the floor of their hut and the lithe and buxom girl he had embraced a mere four years ago.

Later Ezekiel came. A head shorter than Umberto, he was energetic and impulsive, often seeing golden opportunities where the facts were as stubborn and cruel as stones. In this way he had acquired a dubious reputation for intelligence. "You were lucky. They would surely have disposed of you that very evening," he commented like a greybeard, drawing industriously on a long clay pipe which filled the air with blue smoke. "You did the smart thing to return. Now there is no choice. They will attack us next. Send the girl to her parents in Maputo. We'll soon have enough cash to buy her her own village." He snorted derisively. Umberto could feel the blood pounding in his hands and feet. There was a ringing in his ears. He wanted to object, but Ezekiel droned on like a prophet.

"The truck will fetch us before sun up, maybe twenty or so. We'll be well cared for, you can bet on that. We are fortunate. The sickness spreading from the west is gathering strength and we must act quickly. We will take her beyond the Sahara, maybe to Morocco or Libya, where she can have her baby in peace and feast on baklava." He blew a shimmering ring of smoke and cackled like a hyena. Through the crevices of the hut she peered at them sharing a bowl of kif. Then they fell asleep at last on the damp and unforgiving earth. Dogs howled at one another in the distance and all was still.

The sun seemed to rise unwillingly, casting a dim haze across the land. They were the first to clamber into the battered truck. The young driver hooted at them, "Hey, what's the rush? Where do you think you're going, the Ritz Cairo?" A few chickens scattered in panic at the sound of his raucous horn, and as they rounded the bend and took off in the direction of the hills, the village faded and was gone. Yet the future dazzled with promise. All aboard swigged the local brew and brayed the old songs, slapping each other on the back like cronies on a holiday.

Of course, it had been decades since seams of anthracite had coursed through the ledges and outcroppings along the Muntizi River. All of that had been hydraulically depleted, leaving a network of livid scars as reminders of those who hadn't survived their brief subterranean

careers. The Number Three Mine consisted of a vertical shaft extending nearly a mile, and four lateral shafts which rose gradually as the coarse veins conducted them. Although pneumatic drills were available these were not usually employed at such depths on account of the instability of the jerry-built trestles which had a habit of giving way at inconvenient moments. Here, where temperatures regularly hovered at 120 degrees Fahrenheit and one could barely make out objects ahead on account of scanty illumination, teams of African conscripts tore frantically at the walls with pick axes and shovels to meet ever increasing quotas.

It was 3:30 a.m. when Umberto and Ezekiel took up their positions in the decrepit tunnel. With each swing of his axe Umberto thought of her, waiting for the miniscule stipend on which she depended so entirely. He had loved her once, but love seemed now a luxury one could ill afford. On their first night together she had worn a scarlet mantle and breathed heavily in his ear. A halo of musk surrounded her honey-hued flesh. It must have been a dream. Soon they were evicted from their ancestral lands by the government and relocated to a barren place where there was no game. Three goats and a sack of seed were all they received. Henceforth they must be farmers, said the indifferent ombudsman. All around him in the mine Umberto saw men like himself, men whose existences reversed the way of nature by having their burials precede their deaths.

Ezekiel took a pull at his hip flask and cursed the day he set foot in Moatize. "This is hell," he said, "and all the poor devils are here." In that moment something snapped within. He grabbed a jack hammer and began gouging the black face of Hades that seemed to mock his own darkness. His wrath was boundless as he charged at fate with both hands.

"What are you doing?" cried Umberto. "We'll both be fired." Lunging at his comrade he wrestled the drill from his grip. Too late. The bowels of the world had been violated and churned in agony. The tunnel shuddered violently as dust and debris rained down upon them. The trestles were failing. Without thinking they careened forward, tripping over ditches and gear, in a desperate bid to reach the lift in the main shaft. Looking back over his shoulder Umberto saw Ezekiel under a huge beam which had dropped squarely on his shoulders. The spasms in the mine were multiplying, reaching a terrible crescendo. He raced back and tried in vain to pull him out. Then he sought to dislodge the beam, and finally started to claw at the rocky foundation as though he could dig the man free with his fingers.

"Get out, get out, you idiot!" Ezekiel gasped.

But Umberto redoubled his efforts to save him.

"Go, you fool! Go! Are you trying to rescue your friend?"

Umberto looked wonderingly in Ezekiel's eyes, shuttering in grey sand.

"I am not your friend. That baby inside her is mine, not yours. Now get out of here while there's still time, or you will all die with me."

David P. Gontar's latest book is