

*An Unwitting Assassin*

Susie Cazenove

EXTRACT

The raucous wail of sirens pierced the quiet Saturday afternoon, making me drop my book and rush outside to see what drama was taking place. A fleet of cars, their sirens screaming, roared along Oxford Road two hundred yards from our house. Esther, our cook, also ran outside to see what was happening. We both stood on the lawn wondering what on earth it was because sirens were rarely heard near our home. Esther said she thought it must be the ‘big bosses’ from Pretoria going home from the Show.

It was 9 April 1960, a clear sunny afternoon, and Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, South Africa’s prime minister, was attending the opening ceremony of the annual Rand Easter Show. Held every year in Johannesburg since 1907, it was the most important agricultural and industrial showcase in South Africa. Esther and I went back inside; the commotion was over. But within half an hour our telephone started ringing non-stop. All the calls were for my stepfather Gordon Cumming who was out playing golf. A little later Victor Cowles, a friend of my mother and Gordie’s, hurried up the path to the front door and insisted on taking my mother out for a drive, saying he needed to speak to her. Gordie was part of a group of young men who had fought with the South African Air Force during World War II, and Victor Cowles was one of them, along with Gordie’s twin brother Bruce, and Cecil Margo who features later in the book. Clearly, they all had a very strong bond. Victor and his wife Helen were at the Rand Show, sitting in the members’ stand about 20 yards below the President’s Box, when Verwoerd was shot, and Victor saw my father.

Victor started running to the door, shouting to Helen that they had to immediately tell Gordie what had happened. Helen tried to stop him, saying perhaps he had the wrong person; that one didn’t want to be involved in this sort of thing in case one was mistaken. Victor wouldn’t listen; he knew he was right. They ran like the wind from the stand to the car park, as he was adamant that they should get to the house before the press. Esther and I were left behind to field the telephone calls. Gordie was a lawyer, one with a most sympathetic ear who always offered wise counsel, which meant we were used to the comings and goings of people in trouble, as many came to our house with their problems. However, this time it was not to be

the problems of others that the fuss was about, but ours. Helen remained in the car while Victor spoke to my mother. Helen was quickly aware that cars were arriving and parking further down the road, which she was sure was the press. They did not come to our house until after the next day.

Someone had managed to get a message to Gordie who had cut his golf game short and returned home. Mummy was back from her 'drive' and after a brief discussion behind closed doors they called me into the drawing room. They told me to sit down as they needed to talk to me. My heart sank with fear, it sounded so ominous.

"Darling," Gordie said, "there is no easy way to tell you this. It's about your father. He has just shot Verwoerd in the President's Box at the Show."

I stared at him in shock.

"Oh my God," I said. "Is he dead?"

"No. The bullet went through his cheek and lodged in his neck. He has had a miraculous escape and is in hospital." His voice was compassionate but he sounded worried. I slumped back in my chair, horrified and feeling so deeply and desperately sad for Daddy.

We learned later that Verwoerd had made a speech prior to viewing the prize-winning cattle in the arena, which concluded with the following words uttered in his high-pitched voice: "We shall become nobody's corpse, we shall fight for our existence and we shall survive." He turned from the prize bull he had been admiring and made his way up to the President's Box to sit and watch the animals parade around the arena. Within moments of his arriving in the box my father got up from his seat nearby and, with no warning, walked up and shot Verwoerd on the right side of his face.

Pandemonium erupted.

Security men grabbed Daddy and hustled him down the stand into the nearest police car. Blood was pouring down Verwoerd's face, but he was alive. A stretcher was rushed up the steps above the heads of the bewildered crowds who were surging around the stands, pushing and shoving, trying to see what had happened. Within moments the stretcher rapidly descended carrying Verwoerd wrapped in a blanket, again above the heads of the crowd, to a waiting estate car. A crowd of Verwoerd's Afrikaans supporters swarmed around the vehicle

in front of the Members' Pavilion, shouting angrily and aggressively at the English-speaking Rand Show membership.

Immediately after the shooting the President of the Rand Show announced over the loudspeaker system that Dr Verwoerd had been shot and wounded and was on the way to hospital. He said that everyone should leave as the Show would now be closed for the day. The car had raced to a hospital in Pretoria with a cavalcade of escort vehicles, their sirens screaming all the way there. The route to Pretoria took them down Oxford Road, just moments away from our house.