

Characters

Tendai Muruvi: an eighteen-year-old man living in Zimbabwe

Sibongile: a seventeen-year-old woman from Harare

Beatrice: a friend of Sibongile's

Shamba Muruvi: Tendai's father

Abigail Majozi: Shamba Muruvi's second wife and Tendai's stepmother

Amos Muruvi: Abigail's and Shamba's six-year-old son

Gugu Muruvi: Abigail's and Shamba's one-year-old daughter

Memory Muruvi: Abigail's and Shamba's eleven-year-old daughter

Chief Winston Majozi: Abigail's uncle

Aunt Ivy: Chief Winston's wife

Zola: a young woman volunteer and journalist

Nomalanga: an old woman

Mrs Ndlovu: a safari camp manager

Alfred: a safari guide

Mayor Method Kapuya: leader of the town council

Mr McInley: a hotel owner

Bart Gresham: a landmine expert

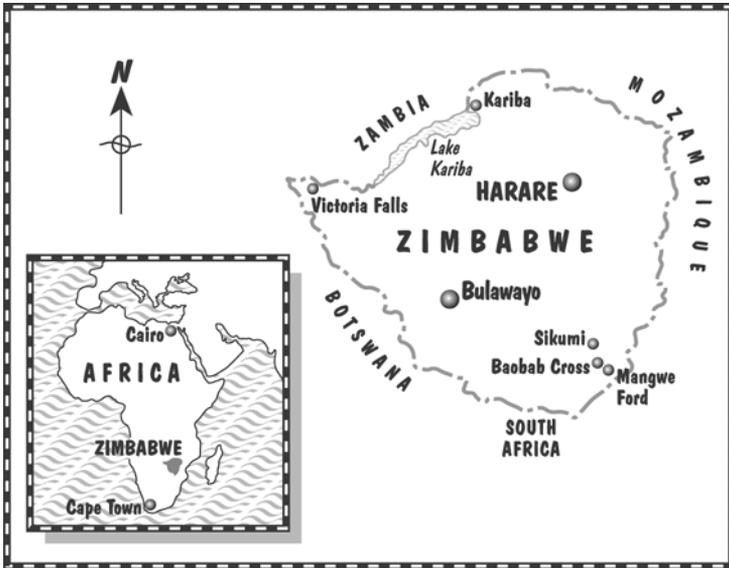
Mrs Gresham: Bart's wife

Gareth Gresham: Bart's son

Kit: a working dog

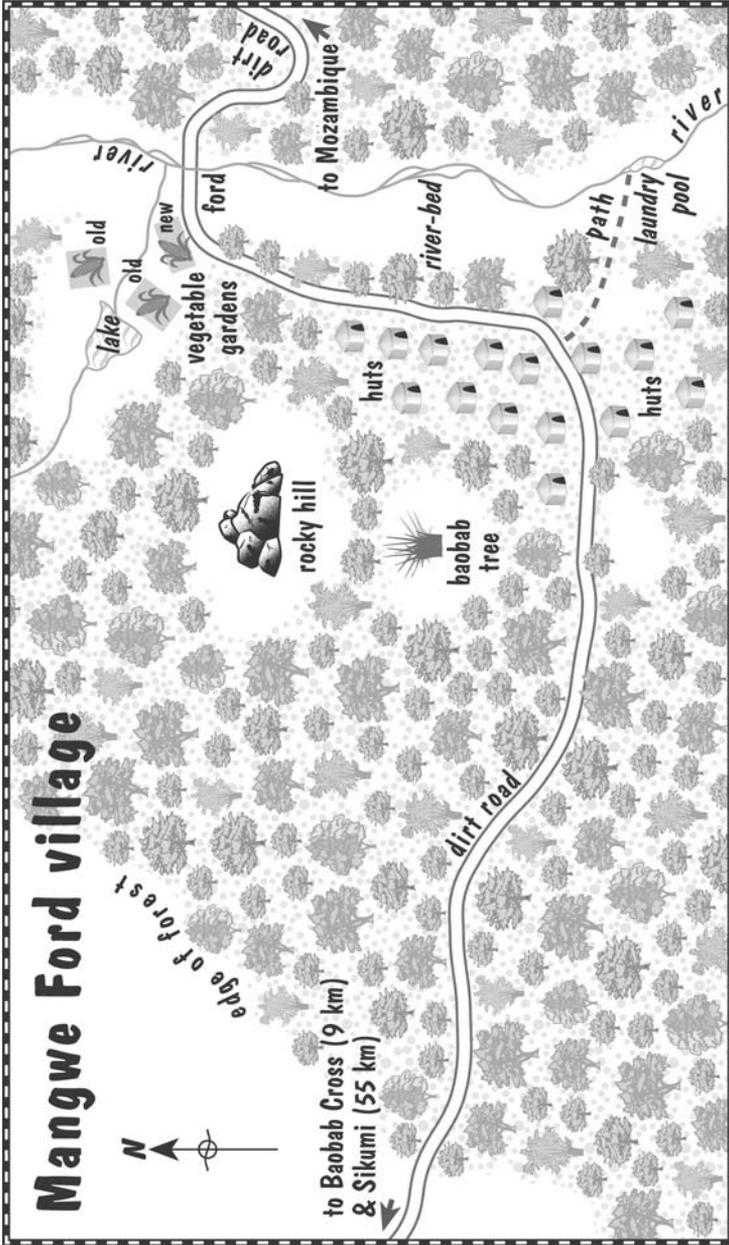
Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-13264-0 - Dragons' Eggs
 J. M. Newsome
 Excerpt
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This story is set in Zimbabwe in 2006. Sikumi, Baobab Cross, Mangwe Ford and Elephant Junction are all imaginary. The other places mentioned are real.



In 2007 over 5400 people (more than 14 per day) were killed or injured by landmines all over the world. Most governments do not help survivors directly. The International Red Cross and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities try to take care of survivors. Landmine clearance is also usually done by NGOs. Some of these collect their own money, some are paid by charities or governments. In 1997 many countries signed the United Nations agreement not to make or use landmines (The Ottawa Treaty), but the United States, India, China and Russia, among others, have not signed. Wikipedia and the United Nations websites can tell you more.

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Chapter 1 *Punishment*

The day before I met Sibongile was my last day at school. I'd been at an expensive private high school in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, for seven years. But on the day I met Sibongile I woke up in the small village of Mangwe Ford. The houses were huts made of mud and grass, there was no electricity or running water, and the nearest telephone was two hours' walk away. I felt lost, like a train without its rails.

The sun was rising when I came out of the guest hut where I'd slept. In front of me was a clearing in the forest with huge trees all around it. Sunlight sliced between the branches. On the other side of the clearing a tall young woman with a huge basket on her head was walking away from me along a path. Dust rose round her feet. There was no one else around, but I could smell smoke from a cooking fire somewhere. My six-year-old brother Amos, who'd slept beside me on the floor, had gone out earlier.

I stepped away from the door and a second young woman, who was hurrying to catch the other one up, ran into me. Her basket went flying. T-shirts, dresses and underwear rained down as I held her arm to stop her falling over.

'I didn't see you,' she said.

'Obviously,' I replied. 'Are you OK?'

She looked up at me from under her eyelashes with a wide smile. 'I'm fine. But you're standing on my best dress.'

I stepped back. A dress had fallen on the path. It was very dirty. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'You're going to do your laundry?'

'Yes,' she said, picking up the clothes and putting them back in the basket. 'The clothes were already dirty, but you've made them worse. Your punishment is to help us.'

'Punishment?' I said, surprised.

'Certainly. Follow me.' She lifted her basket back on to her head and set off, her body moving invitingly.

I was confused about this 'punishment'. Was it something accepted in village culture, or just her way of laughing at a new arrival? But I followed anyway, enjoying watching her from behind.

We passed under the trees, crossed a wide area of white sand and came to the river. The other young woman was already knee-deep in the water, beating clothes on the rocks. She looked at me and smiled – a polite, friendly smile. My knees went weak and I sat down rather suddenly on a rock.

The young woman I'd followed said, 'I'm Beatrice.' She waved a hand at the tall one. 'And that's Sibongile.'

I swallowed. 'Hi,' I said. What was wrong with my voice?

Sibongile said, 'Hi,' and went back to work.

Beatrice said to me, 'Here. Take my dress. Wet it and beat it on the rock, like this.'

But I sat with the dress in my hands. I hardly heard what Beatrice said because I was watching Sibongile.

'OK,' said Beatrice. 'If you don't know how to wash clothes, you'll have to tell us all about yourself.'

'Will that be my "punishment"?' I asked.

She nodded. 'What's your name?' she shot at me.

'Tendai Muruvi,' I answered.

'And how old are you?'

'Eighteen,' I said. 'I finished school yesterday.'

'Which school?'

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'A private school near Harare.' Maybe Sibongile couldn't hear me. I spoke a little louder over the sounds of the river and the laundry. 'My dad's boss, Owen Woods, was rich until last week. He paid for me to go there, and wanted me to go to university.'

Beatrice spoke as she worked. 'Is your dad ... the man who is ill? What does he do?'

'Now? Nothing. He was chief mechanic on Mr Woods' orange farm near Harare. The Woods family left suddenly last week and the farm was taken over two days later.'

Beatrice and Sibongile looked at each other. I guessed they already knew about Mr Woods' farm, and all the workers being forced to leave due to the Land Reform Programme. They knew because my stepmother, Abigail, came from this village. She'd brought my sick dad and my brother and sisters here three days ago, because she had nowhere else to go.

I said, 'But you know all that already.' Sibongile didn't react. I stood up, ready to leave. My legs were OK now.

But Beatrice wasn't going to let me go. 'Why didn't you come with your family?'

'Because I was still at school when the farm was occupied,' I said. 'I came here on the bus from Harare. It took all day, and left me at Baobab Cross. I walked from there.'

Sibongile looked up. 'Do you know Harare?' she asked.

'A bit,' I answered. She really was lovely. I sat down again.

'Do you play any sports?' asked Beatrice. Sibongile looked away again, the flying drops of water from her work making shining lines of light in the sun.

'I was captain of the school rugby team,' I answered.

Beatrice smiled at me. 'Did you bring anything nice with you, like ... chocolate?' They both exploded with laughter.

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I stood up. 'Ladies,' I said, 'I must see how my father is.'
'Wouldn't you like to ask us anything?' Beatrice asked.

I was suddenly full of anger. 'Lots of things,' I shouted. 'What will my family do here? Will my dad recover? How am I going to study now? How do I get out of here?'

They both looked at me in surprise. Then Sibongile came over to me, looked me in the eyes and said, 'This is quite a large village, you know, even though it's so new. We have cows, chickens and goats, and vegetable gardens. We have cool shade, and water all year round. It was built near the Wildlife Park for tourists to visit. There are no tourists now, of course, but compared to other places, we're lucky.'

Her lovely face was completely serious. She was trying to make me feel better, but I hardly heard her words. I was trying very hard not to put my arms around her and squeeze her till she couldn't breathe. I'd never felt like that before and it confused me.

Stupidly, I said, 'I didn't want to come here.'

'It's not so bad,' Sibongile said. 'When we first came, I missed my cellphone and the TV and stuff. But it gets easier.'
'How?' I asked.

She turned back to her work with a smile. 'For a start,' she said, 'we have a wind-up charger for our cellphones now. We can charge up the batteries by hand.'

'But,' said Beatrice, 'there's no signal, so they're useless anyway.'

They both laughed at this wonderful joke. I turned back towards the huts. I had to get control of myself.

'See you later?' Beatrice asked.

'Maybe,' I said and walked back across the sand.