

### Bertha finds a cloud of feathers

The Ford bantam coughed and wheezed, bouncing over the corrugated dirt. Bertha had slammed a large foot on the accelerator and was slowly gaining momentum. She had hurried herself back to the van as soon as she realized what this day might bring, hoping that the total would be made more respectable than the current 308. It had been a stubborn 308 for several weeks now, but perhaps this was about to change.

Moments earlier Bertha had pulled her ramshackle van onto the shoulder of the dirt road. That was the fourth or fifth feather she had seen or was it just the usual shredded plastic that littered the 100-or-so kilometres to Chinunka? She decided to pause her grinding four-hour journey to investigate further. Yes, a feather, for sure. She rotated the feather between her pinched thumb and finger and caressed the vane, returning it to original shape as she pondered the possibilities. Interesting. Soft, a domestic bird? And white. Well, white-ish. Egg-white. Bertha smiled, definitely a domestic bird. Excitedly, she rushed back to the van and heaved herself through the driver's door. What were the chances, she thought. She had travelled about 28km from lakeside Karonga—she knew that because minutes ago she passed a sign reading "Tondola 45km". Tondola was precisely 73km from Karonga en route to Chinunka and if the vehicle with its precious cargo had passed here recently, and it surely had for the feathers were becoming more abundant, she would easily catch it up. Her Ford, damaged and dilapidated as it was, was robust and speedier than any of the fourth, fifth, or even sixth-hand vehicles that one was likely to encounter along these roads. And when she located this unknown traveller, they would be alone. Very few cars negotiated this route. There was the once-a-week bus or truck ferrying people and provisions between the two towns, but they journeyed on weekends and today was Monday. And of course, there was the odd cargo of goats, sheep or domestic fowl every few weeks, exactly what she was looking for. This time it was fowl, chickens to be sure, and she was closing in on them.

Bertha smiled at the thrill of it and worked her way mentally through the possibilities. There! She spotted them as they spluttered up a hillock. A cloud of feathers trailing a white pickup. The cargo was being tossed about as Bertha drew up behind her quarry. Occasionally the pickup hit a particularly large corrugation left by the summer rains and she was temporarily engulfed by soft plumes. She drew alongside the pickup and waved angrily at the driver to pull over.

The door of the white pickup flung open and a slim, wizened old man stepped out the pickup, clearly irritated by this unexpected interruption. "What's going on," he shouted at Bertha as she wrestled herself out the cab. He spoke the local Tonga, so she responded in Chichewa.

"I'm from the Central African Agricultural Authority," she announced. "Routine checks ..... monitoring the movement of livestock. Are all these yours?" She gave a peremptory nod in the direction of the cargo. The birds peered back at her.

"What?!" his brow furrowed.

"All chickens, I see. You heading to Tondola? Chinunka?" she asserted herself and pulled out a notebook as though to record his answers. Taken aback by her well-rehearsed officialdom he immediately submitted. "Chinunka", he responded. The chickens huddled in their cages, their mangled feet protruding through the wire mesh beneath. They too looked suspiciously at her, unsure what to make of this unexpected, but welcome, intrusion.

"That's a long journey. Have you provided water for these birds?"

"Water?!" He was confused, this woman was peculiar. What was she thinking, no one provides water on the way to slaughter?

"Yes, waaaar-tuuuurrr," she over-articulated the syllables and drank from an imaginary bottle, implying he may have trouble hearing or didn't understand Chichewa.

"No". He looked her up and down. "Where did you say you from?"

Bertha had learned how to read these kinds of situations. When to push, when to retreat. She walked closer and glared menacingly at him. "I ask the questions," her face mere centimetres away. She waddled her way around the pickup glancing at the worn tyres, the peeling paint, and

wrapped her knuckles on the front fender, testing its durability. She came to a halt at the back of the pickup and rested a heavy arm on the tailgate. "If you don't have water you don't get to keep the chickens" she stated matter-of-factly. "Not to mention the state of your pickup. Have you allowed people to ride in this thing? Children, even? I'm sure the police would be interested to know the answer to that?" Bertha had sensed his reluctance to protest and maintained her threatening tone. The police. That will frighten him if anything did. He wouldn't want that, the never-ending questions, explanations, and intimidation.

His earlier irascibility had vanished. "What do we do with the fowl?" he succumbed, anticipating a contrived solution. He loathed the 'system' as he referred to it, but anything to avoid police.

"You have to let them go," she said.

"Go?" This was unexpected. "Go! Go where?" The old man was more confused than ever. Wasn't she planning to confiscate them, knowing that was the usual way officials managed to top up their meagre wages?

"Go free. Free to do as they please," she feigned surprise at the ignorance of his question.

"They'll all die out here!"

She shrugged, "not all. And those that do will at least die free souls. Don't you know what that means?" She looked quizzically at him, for a moment genuinely confused.

She prised open the cages as the old man looked on in disbelief. This must be the 'mad woman' Zikomo had told him about and once, sporting a bruised eye, had also cautioned him against. She was large, strong and appeared quite willing to use her authority.

Bertha counted them as they hobbled off, propelled awkwardly by their shattered limbs.....22, 23, 24, and that's 25.

"Now scoot," she instructed him, "and don't let me see you ferrying cargo like this again. Treat them with dignity or I won't be so lenient next time, and the authorities won't take kindly to your attitude should I have to mention it to them."

The old man didn't look back as he climbed into his pickup. He drove off, this time leaving a trail of dust behind as he departed.

Twenty-five plus 308. That's 333. She thought about the few that will manage to survive. They will soon join the others, and seek the shade afforded them by the acacias, free to do whatever it is they wish. The 'wild ones' she called them.

Bertha hauled herself back in the van and smiled.