
Blood Feuds

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No one who has not felt it can understand the pain of an exile. Living in a country that is not your own, among people who are not your people. Always a foreigner, an outsider, someone who does not belong.

Two families, living in Zimbabwe, but the country they call home is Malawi, a country they have not seen for nearly thirty years, a sad, troubled country...

Of course my father and Uncle Phala had their little disagreements. But they were the usual ones among friends. Then there were all those moments of loneliness, of no hope at all, that everyone in exile feels. But they always survived, because they missed home so much. They never doubted they would return one day.

That was all my father and Uncle Phala dreamed about: the return to their own country. They talked about home all the time. How they grew up. The games they used to play. The schools they went to, the fight for freedom.

'You young ones have no idea what we had to do to get rid of the British,' Uncle Phala used to tell us whenever he could. He was proud of the injury to his leg, which he said he got in a street battle against the government in the 1950s. And then my father, of course, felt he had to show us the marks on his back, which he got from beatings in prison.

'I was in prison for a week,' he would say proudly, 'not like others who only got injured in a fight.' Over the years his time in prison became a month, six weeks, then a year.

'Don't listen to him,' Uncle Phala would answer. 'He fell out of a tree. That's how he got those marks!' And he would break into a great, deep laugh.

'Now I'll tell you how he really got his injury!' my father would say, also laughing. And they would go on like this.

It wasn't just that they liked each other - it was much more than that. They called each other brother. It was twelve years or more before I learned that Uncle Phala was, in fact, not my real uncle. He and my father had met in the mining village in Zimbabwe where I was born and grew up.

Their two families lived together in a flat as big as a matchbox, and my

brothers and sisters and I grew up and went to school with Uncle Phala's children. When we finished school, I and most of my brothers became miners and lived in the mining village.

All through their years in Zimbabwe my father and Uncle Phala were involved in exile politics. It began with the mining village's Home Burial Society. This helped workers from our home country in times of trouble, particularly burials. Years later my father and Uncle Phala joined the National Redemption Movement. This was an organization of exiles who were against the government back home.

When I was a young boy, I sometimes went with my father and Uncle Phala to the beer hall where the Movement held its meetings. They were both good organizers and fine speakers. Whenever one of them rose to speak, the hall became silent and people listened to every word. After they finished speaking, everybody would clap, and I felt so proud of them. When they stopped working as miners at the age of fifty, they began working full-time for the Movement, which grew quickly, thanks to a large exile community.

Over the years the news from home got worse. We heard of arrests, violence, and worse. It was not the government that my father and Uncle Phala had fought for when the British left in the 1960s and our country finally became independent.

'In the beginning,' my father remembered, 'we loved them. We loved the government. We thought it was ours.'

I remember Uncle Phala telling us when we were small about the day of independence.

'Everything seemed so beautiful that day. The sunshine felt a little gentler, the skies were bluer, the plants were greener, and the air smelled fresher. Just before midnight the British flag was taken down, and our flag was raised as thousands clapped. We loved every word our leader spoke. We called him "the savior" - we thought he would save us.' Like so many other people, my father and Uncle Phala spent all the money they had to go to the capital for the independence ceremony - a great day for our country.

At that time my father worked on a farm. Soon afterwards he lost his job when the farm was sold to one of the new government officers who preferred to employ workers from his own part of the country. Uncle Phala lost his job because he was the leader of a workers' organization at his factory. The new government did not allow workers' organizations any more, saying that the workers had no enemies now that independence had been won.

So Uncle Phala and my father left the country a couple of years later, as so many others had done before them, to look for jobs in the mines of Zimbabwe.

The exiles in Zimbabwe learned to live with the bad news that came from home. They would discuss it and pass it on, but it was something they did not actually experience. Although exile was painful, they could hide behind it and dream, and avoid being responsible for their own lives.

I did not think of myself as one of them. Of course, I considered where my parents came from as my homeland too, although I had never been there. But I also felt strong ties to Zimbabwe, the place of my birth. At home we spoke my parents' language; elsewhere we used one of the local languages.

I never really had to think much about my real home until I was an adult. It didn't matter when I was a child. Of course, the other children would sometimes call us by rude names - whatever word was fashionable for 'foreigners' at the time - but it never mattered to me. Not so in later years. It was partly age, I suppose. As you grow older, things seem to hurt a little deeper.

The situation in Zimbabwe was also changing. People began to think of themselves less as Africans and more as Zimbabweans. We became 'foreigners', even those of us who were born in Zimbabwe, when it came to giving out jobs and to finding someone to blame for the nation's problems.

That is when I became more involved in the National Redemption Movement. Slowly, our community turned inward, and as far as possible we kept together, helped one another, and married among ourselves.

I married Uncle Phala's eldest daughter, Mwali, which pleased both our parents greatly. 'We are now real brothers!' the two men told everyone at the wedding ceremony.

I began to miss my homeland as much as my father and Uncle Phala did. I wanted to know more about it. So I asked questions; I searched for information in books, newspapers, and magazines. I dreamed of the shining lake with its golden sand beaches, the rivers, hills, and mountains, and the cool green highlands. A land, as my father and Uncle Phala remembered it, of tidy villages, handsome cities, safe streets, and smiling faces. Not this dry, empty land that was only good for exiles.

We hoped and dreamed. In the meantime I grew older. I had three children. My father and Uncle Phala began to look like the grandfathers they were. They continued to be involved in the Movement, but the situation in our homeland stayed the same. None of us thought it would change soon, although we did not doubt that change would come in the end. Nobody imagined how quickly the thirty-year-old regime would fall a few years later.

People had been unhappy for years, of course, but it was the church leaders who brought it into the open. One Easter Sunday the priests read out a letter in churches throughout the country. The letter did not ask for anything unusual, just

simple things like respect for the law, freedom for political prisoners, food for the hungry... But the letter hit the country like a bomb. No one had ever demanded these things openly before. Some church leaders were arrested and terrible warnings were given.

But it was too late. The students, young and impatient, joined the fight. 'Give us free elections!' they demanded. 'Let political prisoners go free!' The universities and colleges were closed and the students were sent home. That only made things worse, because the students took the message back to their home towns.

Then the workers joined the battle. They stopped work, demanding better pay. The police tried to break up one protest march, but they only succeeded in shooting hundreds of workers and starting angry protests all over the country. Even foreign governments and banks began to talk about sending no more money to a regime that had lost control.

I had never seen my father and Uncle Phala so excited. They had the radio and television on all the time, following the news from home. For some reason I was not as excited as I had expected. I had become so used to hoping and dreaming that the possibility of return frightened me. Exile had always been my life. It was all I knew.

Other things made me uneasy too. Our community of exiles began to break into two groups: those who wanted to return, and those who were not so enthusiastic. The same disagreements were seen in families, and before long in the Movement itself. At our yearly meeting there were so many arguments that by the end the Movement had broken into three separate groups. It was sad to watch.

Nothing prepared me for what was waiting for us in our dear homeland. It was certainly beautiful, but that was all. We went first to my father's village. I was disappointed. It was nothing more than a group of rough mud houses. I met some of my uncles and aunts for the first time. They all looked much older than my father, although they were younger than he was. They were nice and friendly, but that was all they could offer us. It was the same at my mother's village, which was a few miles away.

I felt like a stranger. Our relations called us machona, meaning the long lost people. As machona, we were expected to bring endless presents, far more than the workers who returned every two years or so, carrying huge suitcases full of gifts for their relations - clothes, blankets, radios, watches, sunglasses... For a couple of months they would live like chiefs. Then, when all their money had gone, they would leave for Zimbabwe once again. But we disappointed our relations. I suspected that this was one of the reasons that my father had not

returned for so long.

I also began to understand that my own people were no different from the people of Zimbabwe, who had many arguments and fights between their different ethnic groups. We were proud that our community of exiles in the mining village had no silly ethnic arguments of that kind, although we had people who came from different places and ethnic groups in the homeland. My father, for example, was from the south, and Uncle Phala from the north. But back in our own country I heard the same sad, silly arguments.

In fact, it was more serious than that. All our politicians, old and new, seemed to want to make trouble between the different ethnic groups. Perhaps this was because no political party had any real ideas or plans for our country's future.

My father, of course, soon got involved in politics. At first he was busy trying to start a business with the money he had brought back from Zimbabwe. Then someone asked him to be a leader of one of the local parties. He said no at first, but I think that was only because he did not want to seem too enthusiastic.

'Well, I have to do what is best for my people,' he said in the end. 'They need a man of my experience for leadership.' It was good for his business. Many of the local businesses here in the south were owned by northerners, and people were beginning to dislike this more and more.

A few weeks later I went north with my family to visit Uncle Phala. We were well received. Uncle Phala proudly introduced me to his relations. I liked his village better than my father's. The place and the people seemed less miserable. Mwali and I decided to make our home there and start a business. I bought two lorries to take fish from the lake to the capital. It would make me a lot of money.

My father was not pleased with my plan when I returned for a visit. He said I was turning my back on my people.

'But Father,' I protested, 'we're living with Uncle Phala. He's your "brother", remember?'

'Uncle Phala is all right. It's his people who aren't.'

'I can't believe you, of all people, saying that.'

I did not tell Uncle Phala about my father's opinions. He was pleased that we had decided to stay.

'You're my favourite son. You've been good to my daughter.' Uncle Phala did not have a son. All of his eight children were girls.

Like my father, he had also started a business, which was doing quite well. Before long he, too, was asked to join a leading local political party. And like his 'brother', he waited for a while before he agreed.

And so the two most important men in my life became caught in the new politics. Each party tried to organize bigger meetings, bigger marches than the others; no one discussed plans for government. Political prisoners, locked up in prison, were almost forgotten, except by their mothers. And no party called for national discussions on how to bring good government to our poor, weak, unhappy country.

It was difficult not to be part of the noisy business of politics, but I tried to stay out of it. I missed the quieter politics of exile. Here there was no hoping, no dreaming - it was all rough and real. Too rough, in fact.

A couple of months before the elections were held for a new government, violence broke out. It was not clear who started it. Northerners accused southerners, and southerners accused northerners. Both sides chased the 'foreigners', the outsiders, living among them. Church leaders and others blamed the government for making the troubles worse. The government, of course, said that they were not responsible.

Our "savior", now a very sick old man, said the violence proved he was right. It showed that party politics and elections were as foreign to the country as winter.

One morning we were woken by a noise like a bomb exploding. We looked out of the window. My lorries were on fire. We all knew why, but we blamed thieves for it. It was less painful that way. We were trying to keep the hopes and dreams of exile alive, but we could not hide from the real world any longer. That evening Uncle Phala spoke what was on our minds.

'You're not safe here. Maybe you should go home.'

'I thought I was home,' I said, more in sadness than in anger.

'So did I. This isn't the country your father and I left thirty years ago. They've changed it into something else, something terrible, that will eat us alive if we aren't careful.' For the first time he looked very old.

'We'll be out of here as soon as we can.'

'No, you'll go alone. Mwali and the children will be as unsafe in your home as you are here.'

'But I can't leave my family behind.'

'It's for their own good, and for your own good too,' he said sadly. 'Believe me.'

'It's not right,' I said softly. 'It's just not right.'

He did not look at Mwali or me, but I could see that he agreed.

Mwali and I spent a sleepless night discussing the matter. We decided that we would either stay together or leave together. Nothing would separate us.

But we did not have time to tell Uncle Phala what we had decided, because

early the next morning we heard a large crowd shouting excitedly outside.

'We want the southerner!' they screamed. 'We want the southerner! Give us the southerner!'

'Hide under the bed quick,' Mwali whispered.

The shouting came closer, and some people started banging on the door. Then the noise stopped, and we heard Uncle Phala's voice. 'He ran away last night!'

'No!' the crowd shouted with disappointment. 'We want the southerner!'

'You know how these southerners are!' Uncle Phala shouted. 'They don't know what "brave" means. They may be good with books and take all the jobs for teachers and clerks, but that's all they can do. They can't fight. That boy may have balls, but he's no braver than a woman.'

The crowd laughed.

'Leave the house alone.' Suddenly he called out Mwali's name. 'Come and tell these brave sons of the north where your useless husband is.'

I could not believe what he was saying. Had he gone crazy?

'What should I do?' she asked me desperately.

'I don't know. What's wrong with your father? I thought he loved me. He told me so himself.'

'Mwali! Please come out and tell these men where your good-for-nothing husband went.'

I felt suddenly angry. 'Go. He's your father.' I pushed her and she started crying. 'Go, I said!'

'Don't scream. They'll hear you.' She tried to get herself under control. 'Please stay where you are. Don't move,' she said as she went unwillingly to the door.

'See, she's crying,' Uncle Phala said when she came out. 'I told her not to marry a southerner!' The crowd began to go away, still shouting about southerners. Moments later Mwali returned, looking both shaken and thankful.

I stayed indoors the whole day. Later Uncle Phala came to me. I could see the unhappiness on his face. 'I'm sorry I had to say all those things.'

'So you didn't mean it,' I said coldly.

'Of course not.' He was trying not to cry. 'That was the only way I could save you, by talking their kind of language. You'll always be my favourite son, no matter what.'

I do not know how long we sat there, staring at the walls. We all wished to be back in the old days of exile.

I escaped that night, and my people were thankful to see me safe.

'I always told you that northerners are cruel and wild,' my father said. I

could not remember him ever saying that. But I did not feel like arguing with him. I just wanted to sleep and dream of the simpler days of exile.

The elections were held on time. The old governing party just managed to win, but the other political parties refused to accept the results and did not recognize the government. While this argument went on, the army appeared on the streets, and the frightened country became calm.

It seemed safe enough for me to ask Mwali and the children to come. Uncle Phala came with them.

When the two old men met, they put their arms round each other. For a while it seemed like the old days, except that they both looked so much older now. They were both much thinner. Uncle Phala walked even more painfully, and my father could not see or hear very well.

But it was not the old days. They had little to talk about. It was painful to watch. The friendliness and the laughter had all gone. The days of exile now seemed so far away and unreal. And yet we had been back for about a year.

Uncle Phala only stayed a couple of days. He left early in the morning. We all went with him to the bus station, except for my mother who was not feeling well. My father and Uncle Phala stood in silence with their arms round each other for what seemed like a long time. From the steps of the bus Uncle Phala waved to us with his stick. waved in return. Then he climbed painfully onto the bus and never looked back.

- THE END -