

The Blissful Reunion

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Huts were set on fire while their occupants snored without suspecting anything. Elderly people were beaten up to death as they were being accused of being reluctant to divulge useful information. Men were ordered to dig graves in which they would themselves be buried alive.

Long single files of refugees fled their motherland which had ceased to be hospitable to its own people. Livestock and poultry bled as fierce looking soldiers donning worn out military fatigues riddled them with bullets vomited by AK-47 guns. These images haunted her whenever she slept. She could not believe that her country could be reduced to a death trap for such a long time. Since a protracted civil war erupted and raged furiously, lives of innocent villagers were left on tenterhooks. Life lost its meaning. The beastly nature in man manifested itself in full.

On his part, Ndayembekeza did not know where his wife and daughter were for five years. In the absence of Tinaliawiri and Nyenyezi, his heart could console itself a bit by cherishing the reminiscences of what had been a very happy family life. Now and again he spent sleepless nights as he tried to buoy his spirits by reflecting on the moments of joy he had shared with his daughter, wife and son when all was well in his country. Could life be

so ruthless as to suddenly bring to an end a relationship which gave meaning to his whole being?

Tinaliawiri, the humorous woman, was not the type one would easily forget. Her mouth-watering cooking would not stop teasing the taste buds of those who ate food prepared by her daily. She was herself a feast to eyes which appreciated beauty in its totality. She boasted of a skin as smooth as the surface of an egg. A skin which glowed with health. Her jet black hair was fluffy. It brought to mind the fur of a cat fed on a daily diet of milk. When she smiled broadly as she normally did, her dimpled cheeks radiated a certain angelic warmth difficult to describe but very easy to experience and appreciate nevertheless.

Her round face was the definition of beauty itself. Whenever she smiled, everybody knew that the moon had started shining. Yes, to reveal its full beauty to the whole world. Her tightly packed milk white teeth reminded one of a mature and dry maize cob. And when she spoke in her slow and seemingly lazy style, she oozed arresting charm and enchanting love. Little wonder then that right from the time Ndayembekeza was dating Tinaliawiri up to when they became man and wife, he treasured moments when in the confines of his hut; he would be the sole beneficiary of such charm and love.

On her part Nyenyezi was indeed the shining star her name suggested that she was. She was a replica of her mother. Those who admired her mother's beauty always commented that she would eclipse Tinaliawiri's beauty once she became a woman. But beauty aside, both Nyenyezi and her mother were self-effacing and polite. Their pleasant manners were as much of a subject of positive debate in their village, and even beyond, as their attention-stealing looks which unleashed the creativity of musicians and praise-singers, who waxed lyrical about two stars which taught the rest how to shine.

It was this girl and her mother who suddenly disappeared from the life of Ndayembekeza, creating a painful vacuum in it. A vacuum which expanded with the passage of every new day. A gap which soured a life which had known genuine love, familial harmony, perfect bliss—the gift of meaningful partnership. Such a vacuum could not be neglected. It could not be ignored. It was there to be seen. It was vividly present to remind Ndayembekeza of what he missed. It tore his heart apart. It disturbed his mind.

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As was their practice from time immemorial, the men of Mpanyira village organised a hunting expedition. They left at dawn. Ndayembekeza was accompanied by his son. Men and their male children carried anything which would be handy on a hunting expedition. Sharp spears were seen everywhere. Machetes were plentiful. Arrow sheaths were full. Bows and clubs were a common sight. Boys accompanying their fathers carried maize flour in small bags and cooking pots. Hunting dogs led the way.

Hunting in those days was serious business. Hunters would sleep in the forest for days as they hunted. Whatever they killed, they skinned it if it required skinning, cut it into manageable pieces, and smoked it in the evening when they lit the fire to scare animals wishing to attack them. On their return to their village, they were welcomed like heroes by wives fed up with eating beans and okra.

It was when Ndayembekeza and colleagues were returning from their hunting expedition, with a lot of meat and wild fruits for their families, that they witnessed the unexpected, much to their bitter disappointment. They stopped in their tracks speechless, bewildered, grieved and annoyed.

Stunned, the men saw a different Mpanyira. It was reduced to ashes. Kraals of goats, sheep, pigs and cattle were nowhere to be seen. The animals themselves were not there. Poultry of all kinds was not within sight. But dry blood could be seen on the ground where it had been spilled. Granaries of maize, millet, beans, and rice did not stand where they had left them. They had all been burnt. Like anthills of the savannah, their ashes told a story of destruction of macabre proportions.

The hunters were confused. They were totally helpless. Their jaws were loosened by indecision. No women were available to receive the meat they had brought. No ecstatic ululation from their grateful spouses greeted them. Girls calling their fathers by their clan names in appreciation of the goodies they had brought them, could not be seen. Children wishing to be hugged by the fathers they had missed were not there at all.

Confusion reigned as men wondered about where their beloved wives, children and relatives had gone. As they shook their heads in apparent bafflement, they did not know how to puzzle out the vexing riddle staring at them defiantly. This misfortune had caught them off guard.

As they sweated profusely, the hunters brought down their loads of smoked meat. The weight they had felt on their shoulders as they carried their meat, was now transferred to their hearts and minds. It was psychological weight alright but the torture it inflicted upon them beat that of the physical loads they had now brought down. It was now torture mixed with the fear of the unknown.

The men never spoke. Rivers of uncontrollable tears descended freely on their faces as they looked at what had been their village once upon a time. Nobody

would find the energy with which to articulate what they felt. The destruction which had occurred was extraordinary. They could not believe the callousness of those who had effected it. The desire to rest, which they had yearned for while they were in the bush, died a natural death. The anticipated happy reunion with their families was now a mere chimera. Nobody was there ready to prepare them a warm bath to soothe bodies pricked by the thorns of climbers. No one was available to remove the thorns which had penetrated their feet. With granaries burnt, a hearty meal from a diligent wife was not anything one would realistically look forward to now.

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She had been one of those who had been fed up with life in a refugee camp, when they got into Nyasaland. She hated the monotony of it all. She was used to the variety of normal village life. She enjoyed working for herself. Handouts in a UNHCR camp denied her the opportunity to fend for herself. They took away her dignity as a human being. It was this feeling which led her daughter and herself to sneak out of the refugee camp to see if she could find a job elsewhere on the tobacco estates.

She wanted to vary her diet. She wished she could buy clothes of her choice. She wanted the privacy of a home of her own. Yes, reminiscent of what she had previously experienced with her husband back in her country.

It was while she was on her search for freedom, independence and self-determination on the individual level, that she met Madondolo the estate owner. He was on a recruitment exercise. He was looking for labourers to work on his estate. He had come from another border district which was seventy miles away from the refugee camp which kept her and her daughter. Madondolo

assured mother and daughter that they would find on his estate a lot of people from their country who were working for him. Since they had their belongings with them, they agreed to follow him.

Life on Madondolo's estate was not a bed of roses at all. It was never meant to be a bed of roses anyway. Nevertheless it was a breath of fresh air compared to camp life. It posed no threat to mother and daughter who were not strangers to hard work. There was total peace. Estate supervisors were not harsh. They gave mother and daughter manageable work to do. The room in which they slept was comfortable. Water was not a problem. It could be drawn from a nearby borehole. The shop on the estate catered to their needs. So did the small clinic Madondolo ran. True to his word, they met fellow refugees with whom they shared reports about the civil war in their country which they heard on radio.

They hated the seemingly never-ending silly civil war. They did not want to remember the day when they fled their burning village. Passing years failed to erase the pain they experienced on that occasion. The disappearance of the poultry they had laboured to raise, the wanton butchering of their livestock, the remorseless burning of their huts, the looting of their granaries, and the shooting of some of their relatives who dared to protest, could not easily be buried in the grave of forgetfulness. These images were lasting scars. All one had to do was look at them and pain would come flooding.

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After what the hunters had seen, they had no choice but to flee their desolate homes. Day and night they walked long distances in the direction of the western part of Nyasaland. They had to be careful in bushes where the warring parties had planted landmines carelessly. They could not take chances in a country

where both government soldiers and the guerillas they fought against did not trust villagers. One group always suspected that they helped the other and vice versa. Such a state of affairs put the villagers in an awkward dilemma—a predicament difficult to disentangle. Needless to say, it disrupted their normal life. The hunters sighed with relief when the UNHCR absorbed them into its camps. They were dog-tired. For years they remained in these camps, like their other compatriots, hoping that the civil war in their country would relent. It was amazing how the people of Nyasaland had accorded them a brotherly welcome.

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Today, Madondo's estate was abuzz with excitement. The much awaited football match, between his estate and another one thirty kilometres away, was on. This was rare recreation which tenants and workers on this estate looked forward to. Tinaliawiri and her daughter got ready for this. They went to the football pitch where the visiting team and its supporters had arrived by lorry. The hosts were just arriving and were being cheered by their fans. There was a lot of milling around, on and around the football pitch. For the period they were on this estate, soccer matches were always a big attraction.

Man and wife suddenly saw each other. A magnetic pull catapulted them into each other's arms. They hugged and embraced each other for what seemed to be an eternity. As daughter and son watched, both of their parents closed eyes. Nobody seemed keen to separate from the other. An avalanche of tears cascaded down their faces. Those tears carried deeper joy. They ventilated the pain which separation had caused when they were unceremoniously pulled asunder. They defined the relief they now felt when their reunion removed the shroud of uncertainty. They manifested the

profound love which united them. They revived sweet memories. Memories no words would express.

The milling of people on and around the football pitch came to a standstill. Madondolo was held spell-bound. He was moved by the unfolding spectacle. His workers and tenants watched, astounded. The hugging couple never spoke. Words failed them. The overwhelming happiness they experienced could not be expressed. The end of the anxiety and uncertainty they had experienced, before they knew each other's whereabouts, could only be enjoyed by one's heart. For Tinaliawiri, Ndayembekeza, and their two children who watched them bemusedly, a new and bright era was opened by this chance meeting. That brightness chased the dark phase which had brought misery into their hearts. As the bodies of the reuniting couple melt into one, they brought light into what had hitherto been a dark chasm.

Out of their separation and a seed of blissful reunion emerged a green plant of renewed love. Their meeting became a genesis of lost but retrieved togetherness. Their physical contact which they had missed for years distilled the sweetness of rejuvenated love. As one looked at their tear-bathed faces, one question arose: Why did this reunion take so long to materialise? Tinaliawiri and Ndayembekeza were bound by a larger force—intangible, indescribable but genuinely felt nevertheless.

When Madondolo learnt about what happened, he pampered the Ndayembekeza family with drinks. He was happy to see that his estate was a venue of an important reunion. As Ndayembekeza, Nyenyezi, Tinaliawiri and Mbiri watched the match played before them, they could not believe how God had been so kind to them. So they were all alive!